

was Attila's slave, bound to the payment of tribute. Therefore, in attacking him covertly like a worthless slave, he was acting unjustly towards his better, whom fortune had made his master.<sup>31</sup>

What a moment it must have been. Here was the full imperial court drawn up in their gorgeous robes and minutely defined order of precedence, the living representation of the divine favour that made the Roman Empire supreme, when in strode the two barbarian ambassadors to act out their pantomime. Priscus' description of the reaction doesn't survive, but nothing better illustrates the confidence with which Attila trod his particular corner of the globe than this ceremonial humiliation of the ruler of the eastern Roman Empire.

### *An Empire of Many Colours*

THERE WAS MUCH more to Attila's European reign of terror, however, than this personal charisma and his finely honed demonstrations of dominance. Such tours de force were as much effect as cause of the two transformations which, in just one generation, had turned the Huns from useful allies of Constantius and Aetius into world conquerors. Priscus' narrative, implicitly points us towards the causes of these changes, without which Attila's career of conquest could not have happened.

As we've seen, Priscus was not the first east Roman historian-diplomat to visit the Huns. In 411/12, Olympiodorus had taken to sea with his parrot, braving fierce storms off Constantinople, then skirting Athens and up the Adriatic to Aquileia on its northern shore. Unfortunately, only a brief summary of this embassy survives, but it does contain one piece of crucial information:

Olympiodorus discusses Donatus and the Huns and the natural talent of their kings for archery. The historian describes the embassy on which he went to them and to Donatus and ... tells how Donatus was deceived by an oath and wickedly killed, how Charaton, the first of the kings, flared up with rage at the murder and how he was calmed down and pacified with regal gifts.<sup>32</sup>

The extract is not without mystery; not least concerning the identity of Donatus - opinions differ as to whether he was a Hun or not - and

of his killers. Some have supposed that the arrival of Olympiodorus' embassy did not merely coincide with Donatus' death, but was an earlier and more successful enactment of the kind of plot that Priscus found himself embroiled in.<sup>33</sup> But the key point is that in 411/12 the Huns were ruled by a series of kings (how many is not specified), and that these kings operated according to a ranking system which clearly marked out Charaton as senior. It sounds highly reminiscent, in fact, of the hierarchical system of another nomadic group, the Akatziri, whose fate came to Priscus' attention during his own embassy. When the Romans arrived at the Huns' camp, Onegesius was away with Attila's eldest son subduing this group. The opportunity to do so had come about in an interesting fashion, as Priscus describes:

The [Akatziri] had many rulers according to their tribes and clans, and the Emperor Theodosius sent gifts to them to the end that they might unanimously renounce their alliance with Attila and seek peace with the Romans. The envoy who conveyed the gifts did not deliver them to each of the kings by rank, with the result that Kouridachus, the senior in office, received his gifts second and, being thus overlooked and deprived of his due honours, called in Attila against his fellow kings.

Apart from allowing one the pleasure of imagining the report of the Roman ambassador who had managed to make such a mess of his mission,<sup>34</sup> the passage gives us some idea of the kind of political system operating among the Huns in the early 410s.<sup>35</sup>

The contrast with Attila's time, a generation or so later, could not be more marked. Priscus spent a great deal of time at the Hunnic court, and devoted many words to its structure and modes of operation. As we have seen, there was then an inner core of leading men - Onegesius first, then others such as Edeco, Scottas and Berichus - whom Attila treated with great respect; but none of them enjoyed any kind of royal dignity. In all of this information, there is not the slightest indication that the Huns had more than one ruler: Attila himself. The multiplicity of power-sharing kings of 411 had given way to a monarch in the literal sense of the word. Of the process that ended up with supreme power in one man's hands, no account survives. As you would expect, all the indications suggest, however, that it was not a peaceful evolution. The final act in the drama was Attila's murder of his brother Bleda. By that stage, power had anyway narrowed to just

two members of the same family – which suggests that Rua (or Ruga), the uncle whom the brothers succeeded, must have played a major role in reducing the number of Hunnic royal lines.

The naked violence of Bleda's murder is probably a fair indication of how the other surplus kings had been removed. The first negotiations between Constantinople and Attila and Bleda, before they attacked Viminacium in 441, resulted in the return, as we have seen, of two fleeing Hunnic royals, Mama and Atakam, who were promptly impaled. They could have been cousins of Attila and Bleda, for Rua had at least two brothers, but might equally have been descended from royal lines suppressed earlier by Rua. The whole fugitive issue, which so bedevilled Hunno-Roman diplomacy in the 440s, was clearly concerned with Hunnic royals and ex-royals of one kind or another. Maximinus and Priscus had to listen to the names of seventeen fugitives being read out – a very small number, so we are clearly dealing here with individuals who posed some kind of threat at the highest level. It is also possible that some of the lesser kings had accepted demotion rather than face extinction. (When something similar was happening among Goths in the decade after Attila's death, though most of the minor royals died fighting or fled from the scene, at least one was willing to be demoted to leading-noble status.<sup>36</sup>)

Set against what we know about nomad anthropology, political centralization – the first of the two transformations that concern us here – must also have been associated with a broader transformation among the Huns. Devolved power structures occur very naturally among nomadic groups, because their herds cannot be concentrated in large groupings, for fear of overgrazing. In the nomad world, the main purpose of any larger political structure is simply to provide a temporary forum where grazing rights can be negotiated, and a force put together, if necessary, to protect those rights against outsiders. This being the case, the permanent centralization of political power among the Huns strongly implies that they were no longer so economically dependent upon the produce of their flocks. Priscus provides a number of clues to the nature of these economic adjustments. As we saw in Chapter 4, nomads always need to form economic relationships with settled agricultural producers. This was clearly the case with the Huns, and commercial exchanges were still taking place in the 440s.<sup>37</sup> But by the time of Attila, the main form of exchange between Hunnic nomad and Roman agriculturalist was not grain in return for animal products,

but cash in return for military aid of one kind or another. This form of exchange had its origins in previous generations, when Huns had performed mercenary service for the Roman state. Uldin and his followers were the first we know of to have fulfilled this role, in the early 400s, and larger Hunnic forces may have aided Constantius in the 410s, and certainly supported Aetius in the 420s and 430s.

Shortly after, military service for pay evolved into demands for money with menaces. Precisely when the line was crossed is impossible to say, but Attila's uncle Rua certainly launched one major assault on the east Roman Empire with cash in mind, even if he also provided mercenary service for the west. By the reign of Attila, targeted foreign aid had become tribute, and it clearly emerges from Priscus' record of Romano-Hunnic diplomacy that the main thing the Huns wanted from these exchanges, and from their periodic assaults across the frontier, was cash and yet more cash. As we saw earlier, the first treaty between Attila and Bleda and the east Romans fixed the size of this annual tribute at seven hundred pounds of gold – and from there the demands could only escalate. Hunnic warfare against the Romans also brought other one-sided economic exchanges in its wake: booty, slaves and ransoms such as the one Priscus and Maximinus negotiated.<sup>38</sup>

By the 440s, then, military predation upon the Roman Empire had become the source of an ever-expanding flow of funds into the Hunnic world. To overthrow a system of ranked but more or less equal kings, the king-who-would-be-preeminent needed to convince the followers of the other kings that they should transfer their loyalties to him. Cornering the market in the flow of funds from the Empire was the ideal means of putting sufficient powers of patronage into the hands of just one man, and rendering the old political structures redundant. Only by controlling the flow of new funds could one king outbid the others in the struggle for support. Already in the mid- to late-fourth century, Huns had presumably been raiding and intimidating both other nomads and Germanic agriculturalists north of the Black Sea, but real centralization only became possible once the main body of the Huns was operating close to the Roman world. Raid and intimidate the Goths and you might get some slaves, a bit of silver and some agricultural produce, but that was about it – not enough to fund full-scale political revolution. But do the same vis-à-vis the Roman Empire, and the gold would begin to roll in, first in hundreds of pounds



annually, then thousands – enough to transform both economic and political systems.

While the argument is not susceptible to proof, we could understand these transformations as an adaptation away from nomadism, rather than a complete break with the past. As mentioned earlier, in normal circumstances nomads rear a range of animals to make full use of the varying qualities of available grazing. The horse figures primarily as an expensive, almost luxury animal, used for raiding, war, transport and trade; its meat and milk provide only a very inefficient return in terms of usable protein compared with the quality and quantity of grazing required. As a result, nomads generally keep relatively few horses. If, however, warfare becomes a financially attractive proposition, as it did when the Huns came within range of the Roman Empire, then nomads might well start to breed increasing numbers of horses for war – evolving, in the process, into a particular type of militarily predatory nomadic group. This could never have worked as a subsistence strategy out on the steppe, where the potential proceeds from warfare were so much less.

It is impossible to prove that this is what happened, but one relevant factor is the size of the fifth-century Hunnic homeland, the Hungarian Plain: while providing good-quality grazing, it was much smaller than the plains of the Great Eurasian Steppe the Huns had left behind. Its 42,400 square kilometres amount to less than 4 per cent of the grazing available, for instance, in the republic of Mongolia alone. And because the grazing was now so limited, some historians have wondered whether the Huns were evolving towards a fully sedentary existence in the fifth century. This is a possible argument, but not a necessary one. The Hungarian Plain notionally provides grazing for 320,000 horses, but this figure must be reduced so as to accommodate other animals, forest and so on; so it would be reasonable to suppose that it could support, maybe, 150,000. Given that each nomad warrior requires a string of ten horses to be able to rotate and not overtake them, the Hungarian Plain would thus provide sufficient space to support horses for up to 15,000 warriors. I would doubt that there were ever more Huns than this in total, so that, as late as the reign of Attila, there is in fact no firm indication that the Huns did not retain part of their nomad character.<sup>39</sup> Whatever the case, the real point is that, once they found themselves within hailing distance of the Roman Empire, the Huns perceived a new and better way to make a living,

based on military predation upon the relatively rich economy of the Mediterranean world.

Priscus' evidence also implicitly documents the other fundamental change that made Attila's Empire possible. At his court, Maximinus and Priscus were interacting primarily with an inner core of second-rankers, rather than with Attila himself. Identifying the language group that ancient personal names belong to is fraught with danger, but the names of these men are extremely interesting. There is no doubt that Onegesius and Edeco possessed Germanic or Germanicized names, while Berichus and Scottas *probably* did. And both Attila ('Little Father') and Bleda are also Germanic. This doesn't mean that these individuals were necessarily of Germanic rather than Hunnic origin (though they may have been), because we know that by the mid-fifth century 'Gothic' – probably the collective term for a number of mutually comprehensible Germanic dialects spoken across central and eastern Europe – was one of the main languages of the Hunnic Empire, and was spoken at Attila's court. Hence, in addition to their original Hunnic names (and the argument continues over what type of language the Huns originally spoke), important figures in the Hunnic Empire seem to have had Germanic or Germanicized names as well.<sup>40</sup> Why had Germanic languages come to play a prominent role in the Hunnic Empire?

The explanation lies in the broader evolution of Attila's Empire. As far back as the 370s when they were attacking Goths beyond the Black Sea, Huns were forcing others they had already subdued to fight alongside them. When they first attacked the Greuthungi, starting the avalanche that ended at the battle of Hadrianople (see p. 167), they were operating in alliance with Iranian-speaking Alan nomads. And whenever we encounter them subsequently, we find that Hunnic forces always fought alongside non-Hunnic allies. Although Uldin, as we saw in Chapter 5, was not a conqueror on the scale of Attila, once the east Romans had dismantled his following, most of the force they were left with to resettle turned out to be Germanic-speaking Sciri.<sup>41</sup> Likewise, in the early 420s, east Roman forces intervening to curb Hunnic power west of the Carpathian Mountains found themselves left with a large number of Germanic Goths.<sup>42</sup>

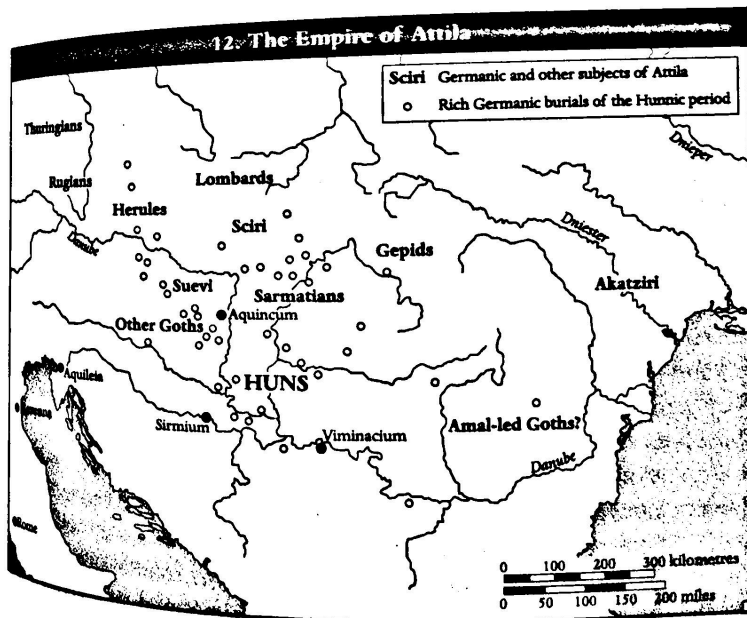
In the years preceding the rise of Attila, the process of incorporation continued apace. By the 440s, an unprecedented number of Germanic groups found themselves within the orbit defined by the

formidable power of Attila the Hun. For example, his Empire contained at least three separate clusters of Goths. One group, dominated by the Amal family and their rivals, would later become central to the creation of a second Gothic supergroup: the Ostrogoths. Another Gothic group was led in the mid-460s by a man called Bigelis, while a third remained under the tight control of Attila's sons until the later 460s. In addition, Germanic-speaking Gepids, Rugi, Suevi (left behind in 406), Sciri and Heruli were all by this point under direct Hunnic control, and a looser hegemony may also have been exercised over Lombards and Thuringians, as well as over at least some subgroups of Germanic-speaking humanity, but the Amal-led Goths alone could muster ten thousand-plus fighting men, and hence had maybe a total population of fifty thousand. And there is no reason to suppose that the other groups were much, if at all, smaller. Many tens of thousands, of Germanic speakers were caught up in the Hunnic Empire by the time of Attila. In fact, by the 440s there were probably many more Germanic-speakers than Huns, which explains why 'Gothic' should have become the Empire's lingua franca. Nor do these Germani exhaust the list of Attila's non-Hunnic subjects. Iranian-speaking Alanic and Sarmatian groups, as we saw earlier, had long been in alliance with the Huns, and Attila continued to grasp at opportunities to acquire new allies.

As this catalogue makes clear, the Hunnic Empire was all about incorporating people, not territory: hence Attila's virtual lack of interest in annexing substantial chunks of the Roman Empire. He took two Middle Danubian provinces from the western Empire as the price of his alliance with Aetius, as we saw in Chapter 6, but otherwise showed interest only in establishing a cordon sanitaire between himself and the east. Although there are many brief chronicle references to Attila's military forces as 'Huns' or (if they're archaizing) 'Scythians', from all the sources that go into any detail it is clear that his armies, like those of his less powerful predecessors, were always composites, consisting both of Huns and of contingents from the numerous other peoples incorporated into his Empire.<sup>44</sup>

Archaeological evidence confirms the point (map 12). Since 1945 a mass of material has been unearthed from cemetery excavations on the Great Hungarian Plain and its environs, dating to the period of Hunnic domination there. (Some treasure hoards have been dis-

covered, but no one has ever found any of Attila's camps, since only post-holes would remain.) In this material, 'proper' Huns have proved extremely hard to find. In total – and this includes the Volga Steppe north of the Black Sea as well as the Hungarian Plain – archaeologists have identified no more than two hundred burials as plausibly Hunnic. These are distinguished by bows, non-standard European modes of dress,<sup>45</sup> cranial deformation (some Huns bound the heads of babies, which provoked a distinctive elongated skull), and the presence of so-called Hunnic cauldrons. So either the Huns generally disposed of their dead in ways that did not leave traces, or some other explanation is required for the scarcity of Hunnic material.<sup>46</sup> What these fifth-century Middle Danubian cemeteries have produced in large quantities, however, are the remains – or what look like the remains – of the Huns' Germanic subjects (unfortunately, it isn't possible to tell the latter apart from one another on the strength of archaeological finds alone).<sup>47</sup> These remains have close fourth-century antecedents in Gothic- and other Germanic-dominated areas east and north of the Carpathian Mountains. Those that interest us here – the fifth-century finds – mark



the emergence of what has been christened the 'Danubian style' of Germanic burial.<sup>48</sup>

The Danubian style is characterized by inhumation rather than cremation,<sup>49</sup> with a large number of objects being deposited in a relatively small number of rich burials. (Many other individuals were buried with few or no grave goods at all.) These characteristic objects included items of personal adornment: particularly large semicircular brooches, plate buckles, earrings with polyhedric pendants, and gold necklaces. Weapons and military equipment have also been quite commonly found: saddles with metal appliques, long straight swords suitable for cavalry use and arrows. The remains also show up some odd ritual quirks; it became quite usual, for instance, to bury broken metallic mirrors with the dead. The kinds of items found in the graves, the ways in which people were buried and, perhaps above all, the way women, in particular, wore their clothes – gathered with a safety-pin, or *fibula*, on each shoulder, with another closing the outer garment in front – all reflect the patterns observable in definitely Germanic remains of the fourth century. These habits and items were then pooled and developed further among the massed ranks of Attila's subjects on the Great Hungarian Plain in the fifth.

One possible answer to the question of the lack of Hunnic burials, then, is that, quite simply, they started to dress like their Germanic subject peoples, in just the same way that they learned the Gothic language. If so, it would be impossible to tell Hun from Goth – or anyone else – in the cemetery evidence. But even if our 'real Huns' are lying there in disguise, as it were, this doesn't alter the fact that there were an awful lot of Germani buried in and around the Great Hungarian Plain in the Hunnic period. What we're looking at in the richly furnished Danubian-style burials are the remains of many of Attila's elite Germanic followers. Date and geographical placement make this a dead certainty.<sup>50</sup>

Every time a new barbarian group was added to Attila's Empire, that group's manpower was mobilized for Hunnic campaigns. Hence the Huns' military machine increased, and increased very quickly, by incorporating ever larger numbers of the Germani of central and eastern Europe. In the short term, this benefited the embattled Roman west. The reason, as many historians have remarked, that the rush of Germanic immigration into the Roman Empire ceased after the crisis of 405–8 (see Chapter 5) was that those who had not crossed the

frontier by about 410 found themselves incorporated instead into the Empire of the Huns; and there is an inverse relationship between the pace of migration into the Roman Empire and the rise of Hunnic power.<sup>51</sup>

In the longer term, however, the respite from assault was only illusory, and a succession of Hunnic leaders achieved something analogous to what the Sasanians had achieved in the Near East. For the first time in imperial Roman history, the Huns managed to unite a large number of Rome's European neighbours into something approaching a rival imperial superpower.

### 'The Whole North into Gaul'

THE FULL FEROCITY of this extraordinary new war machine was felt in the first instance by the east Roman Empire, whose Balkan communities suffered heavily in 441/2 and again in 447. After the two defeats of the 447 campaign, the east Romans had nothing left to throw in Attila's direction. Hence, in 449, their resorting to the assassination attempt in which Maximinus and Priscus found themselves unwittingly embroiled. Still Attila didn't let Constantinople off the hook. Having refused to settle the matter of the fugitives and repeated his demands for the establishment of a cordon sanitaire inside the Danube frontier, he now added another: that the east Romans should provide a nobly born wife (with an appropriate dowry) for his Roman-born secretary. These demands, if unsatisfied, were possible pretexts for war, and his constant agitating shows that Attila was still actively considering another major assault on the Balkans.

In 450, the diplomatic mood was to change abruptly. A new Roman embassy followed the same path north that Priscus and Maximinus had trodden the previous year. This one comprised Anatolius, one of the two most senior military commanders at the eastern court (*magister militum praesentalis*), and Nomus, the Master of Offices (*magister officiorum*). Anatolius was well known to Attila, having negotiated the interim peace deal that had followed the Hunnic victories of 447. It is hard to think of a grander ambassadorial duo – that he should treat only with the noblest had been one of Attila's stipulations. The Roman view of what happened next is recorded by Priscus: 'At first Attila negotiated arrogantly, but he was overwhelmed by the number

of their gifts and mollified by their words of appeasement . . . in the end:

Attila swore that he would keep the peace on the same terms, that he would withdraw from the Roman territory bordering the Danube and that he would cease to press the matter of the fugitives . . . providing the Romans did not again receive other fugitives who fled from him. He also freed Vigilas . . . [and] a large number of prisoners without ransom, gratifying Anatolius and Nomus . . . [who were] given gifts of horses and skins of wild animals.<sup>32</sup>

Rarely can an international summit have had such a satisfactory outcome. Back to Constantinople rode the jubilant ambassador, bringing with them Attila's secretary, who was to be found a suitable wife.

What quickly emerged, however, was that Attila had settled with Constantinople not because – as the stereotypical barbarian – he had been blown away by the wisdom of his east Roman interlocutors, but because he wanted a secure eastern front, having decided on a massive invasion of the Roman west.

As Priscus tells it, in launching this new attack Attila was motivated by his hunger for further and greater conquests, thereby playing out the destiny that the gods intended for him – as his finding of the sword of Mars proclaimed – to conquer the entire world. On his embassy to the Huns, Priscus had at some point in the summer of 449 witnessed Attila acting in what seemed to him an unreasonable manner towards some ambassadors from the western Roman Empire. Afterwards, the talk naturally turned to Attila's character, and Priscus quotes with approval what one of the ambassadors had to say on the matter:

[Attila's] great good fortune and the power which it had given him had made him so arrogant that he would not entertain just proposals unless he thought that they were to his advantage. No previous ruler of Scythia . . . had ever achieved so much in so short a time. He ruled the islands of the Ocean [the Atlantic, or west] and, in addition to the whole of Scythia, forced the Romans to pay tribute . . . and, in order to increase his empire further, he now wanted to attack the Persians.<sup>33</sup>

Someone then asked how Attila proposed to get to Persia from central Europe, to which the reply was that the Huns remembered that, if you followed the north Black Sea coast all the way to the end, you could get there without having to cross Roman territory. True, of course, but going via the Caucasus would be an extremely long trek, and the last time the Huns had done this – in 395/6, as far as we know – they had been living north of the Black Sea, not on the Great Hungarian Plain so much further west. Ambitious plans of conquest, on the face of it, were being drawn up on the strength of half-remembered geography: here was pure lust for conquest aching to swallow up the known world.

But, as we know, Attila went west instead. The sources transmit a variety of reasons why he did so. According to one juicy piece of court gossip, he led his armies into the western Roman Empire because the sister of the western emperor Valentinian III, a high-spirited lady of considerable stamina by the name of Iusta Grata Honoria, offered him her hand in marriage with half the western Empire as her dowry. Supposedly, she sent him a brooch with her portrait on it, along with a letter, and this was enough to ensnare him. Honoria was the daughter of the formidable Galla Placidia who had a fondness for barbarians herself, as we learned in Chapter 6, having married and borne a son to Alaric's brother-in-law Athaulf in the 410s. Placidia, with her Gothic bodyguard, had had what it took to play a major political role, until Aetius took over.

Having fallen pregnant, her daughter Honoria was caught in an illicit love affair with her business manager, a certain Eugenius. Eugenius was executed, and Honoria removed from public life and betrothed to a dull senator by the name of Herculianus. It was in her distress and frustration that she had written to the lord of the Huns and asked him to rescue her. But the story gives one pause. Even after it was discovered that she had written to Attila she escaped death, and was handed over to the custody of her mother; but before, irritatingly, breaking off in mid-sentence, the pertinent Priscus fragment hints that further escapades followed. Honoria's antics are too well documented for there not to be some grain of truth in them,<sup>34</sup> but I don't believe that she was the reason why Attila eventually preferred the west Roman to the Persian option. Just consider the geography. As we will see in a moment, having decided to attack the west, Attila did not rush towards Italy, where Honoria was incarcerated, but first attacked Gaul.

While no doubt sketchy, Attila's knowledge of European geography was good enough for us to be sure he knew on which side of the Alps he was likely to find his putative bride. We don't know what ultimately happened to Honoria. Heading west out of Hungary, the Huns turned right towards Gaul rather than left into Italy, and that's enough in itself to relegate Honoria to a historical footnote.

The sources indicate that rescuing Honoria was only one of several reasons proposed for Attila's invasion of the west. Another was the issue that had prompted his tantrum before the conversation in the summer of 449 in which his possible ambitions concerning Persia had been raised. That particular western embassy had been sent to answer the charge that a Roman banker by the name of Silvanus was in possession of some gold plate that was Attila's by right of conquest. Trivial though the matter was, Attila was threatening war if it was not settled to his satisfaction. There are also vague, but quite convincing hints of some kind of contact at this date between Attila and Geiseric, king of the Vandals, who is said to have bribed Attila to turn his armies westwards. Late in 450, Attila backed a different candidate for the recently vacant kingship of the Riparian Franks from the one Aetius had chosen to support. He had also recently given sanctuary to one of the leaders of a rebellion in north-west Gaul defeated by Aetius in 448. This suggests that Attila had in mind the possibility of using him to stir up trouble and to smooth the path of any Hunnic army operating in the west. Once his armies were on the move, in much the same vein the Hun sent out some mutually contradictory letters to different recipients, some of which claimed that the purpose of his campaign was to attack not the western Empire but the Visigoths of south-west Gaul, while others urged those same Visigoths to join him in attacking the Empire.<sup>55</sup>

What emerges, therefore, is that Attila was simultaneously juggling with several possible pretexts for an attack on the western Empire in the years 449 and 450, as he prepared his next move. Whether an attack on Persia was ever seriously contemplated I doubt, but in 449 he still hadn't decided whether to launch his next assault upon the eastern or the western half of the Empire; and he was not only stirring up trouble with the west, but also refusing to settle outstanding issues with Constantinople. The generous treaty he eventually granted Constantinople was the sign that he was ready to tie up loose ends in the east, having set his sights on the west.

In spring 451, Attila's massive army surged westwards out of the Middle Danube, probably following the route taken by the Rhine invaders of 406. 'It is said' that the army consisted of a staggering half-million men, reported Jordanes,<sup>56</sup> in his choice of words revealing that for once even he didn't believe the figure; but there is no doubting the huge size of the force, or that Attila was drawing on the full resources of the Hunnic war machine. As Sidonius Apollinaris, a more or less contemporary Gallic poet, put it:

Suddenly the barbarian world, rent by a mighty upheaval, poured the whole north into Gaul. After the warlike Rugian comes the fierce Gepid, with the Gelonian close by; the Burgundian urges on the Scirian; forward rush the Hun, the Bellonotian, the Neurian, the Bastarnian, the Thuringian, the Bructeran, and the Frank.<sup>57</sup>

Sidonius was writing metred poetry, and required names of the right length and stress to make it work. What he gives us here is an interesting mixture of ancient groups who had nothing to do with the Hunnic Empire (Gelonian, Bellonotian, Neurian, Bastarnian, Bructeran) and real subjects of Attila (Rugian, Gepid, Burgundian, Scirian, Thuringian and Frank), not to mention, of course, the Huns themselves. But, in essence, Sidonius was spot on. And we know from other sources that large numbers of Goths were also present.<sup>58</sup>

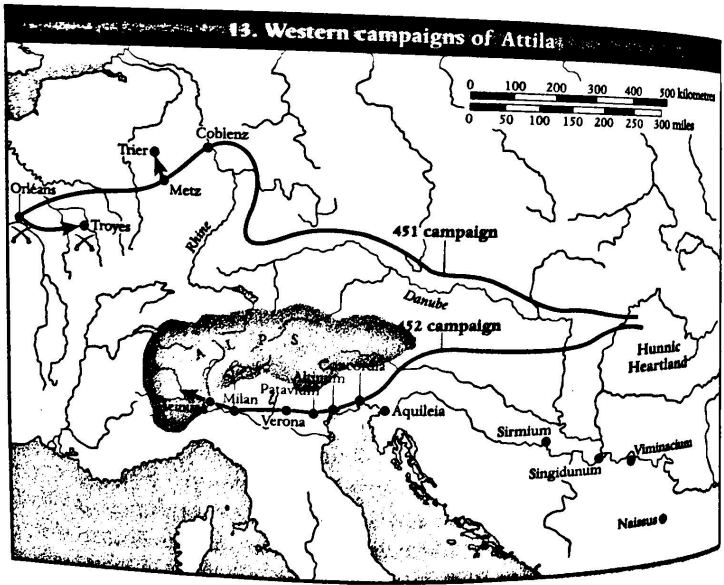
No surviving source describes the campaign in detail, but we know roughly what happened. Having followed the Upper Danube north-westwards out of the Great Hungarian Plain, the horde crossed the Rhine in the region of Coblenz and continued west (map 13). According to some admittedly fairly dubious sources, the city of Metz fell on 7 April, shortly followed by the old imperial capital of Trier. The army then thrust into the heart of Roman Gaul. By June, it was outside the city of Orleans, where a considerable force of Alans in Roman service had their headquarters. The city was placed under heavy siege; there are hints that Attila was hoping to lure Sangibanus, king of some of the Alans based in the city, over to his side.<sup>59</sup> At the same time, according to another pretty dubious source, elements of the army had also reached the gates of Paris, where they were driven back by the miraculous intervention of the city's patron Saint Genevieve. It looks as if the Hunnic army was swarming far and wide over Roman Gaul, looting and ransacking as it went.



Aetius was still generalissimo of the west, and as we know from Merobaudes' second panegyric, he had been anticipating the possibility of a Hunnic assault on the west from at least 443. When it finally materialized, nearly a decade later, he sprang into action. Faced with this enormous threat, he strove to put together a coalition of forces that would stand some chance of success. Early summer 451 saw him advancing north through Gaul with contingents of the Roman armies of Italy and Gaul, plus forces from many allied groups, such as the Burgundians and the Aquitanian Visigoths under their king Theodoric. On 14 June, the approach of this motley force compelled Attila's withdrawal from Orléans. Later in the same month, Aetius' men caught up with the retreating horde somewhere in the vicinity of Troyes, another 150 kilometres or so to the east.

On a plain called by different sources the Catalaunian fields or *campus Mauriacus*, which has never been conclusively identified, a huge battle took place:

The battlefield was a plain rising by a sharp slope to a ridge, which both armies sought to gain ... The Huns with their forces seized the right side, the Romans, the Visigoths and their allies



the left ... The battleline of the Huns was so arranged that Attila and his bravest followers were in the centre ... The innumerable peoples of diverse tribes, which he had subjected to his sway, formed the wings.

The Romans and Visigoths reached the ridge first and thwarted every attempt to dislodge them - so our main source tells us, but then lapses into rhetoric (though pretty good rhetoric it is):

The fight grew fierce, confused, monstrous, unrelenting - a fight whose like no ancient time has ever recorded ... A brook flowing between low banks ... was swollen by a strange stream and turned into a torrent by the flow of blood. Those whose wounds drove them to slake their parching thirst drank water mingled with gore.

Theodoric was killed in the fighting, either struck by a spear or trampled to death when he fell from his horse, but the accounts of his death are confusing. Again according to our main source, a total of 165,000 men died, but this figure is nonsense. At the end of the day's fighting, Attila was distraught. Forced back inside a defensive wagon circle, for the first time ever his army had suffered a major defeat. His initial reaction was to heap up saddles to make his own funeral pyre.<sup>60</sup> But his lieutenants persuaded him that the battle was only a tactical check, and he relented. A stalemate followed, with the two armies facing each other, until the Huns began slowly to retreat. Aetius didn't press them too hard, and disbanded his coalition of forces as quickly as possible - a task made much easier by the fact that the Visigoths were keen to return to Toulouse to sort out the succession to their dead king. Attila consented to his army's continued withdrawal and, tails between their legs, the Huns returned to Hungary. Although the cost to the Roman communities in the Huns' line of march was enormous, Attila's first assault on the west had been repulsed. Yet again, Aetius had delivered at the moment of crisis. Despite the limited resources available, he had put together a coalition that had saved Gaul.

In his wrath, the Hun spent the winter of 451/2 limbering up for yet more violence. This time the blow fell on Italy. In the spring of 452, his force broke through the Alpine passes. The first obstacle in their path was Aquileia. Here they were held up by the city's massive defences - Attila even contemplated calling off the whole campaign.

On the point of bringing their long and frustrating siege to a halt, he saw a stork shipping its young out of the nest that it had built in one of the city's towers, carrying one by one those that couldn't yet fly. Seeing this, Priscus tells us, 'he ordered his army to remain still in the same place, saying that the bird would never have gone . . . unless it was foretelling that some disaster would strike the place very shortly.' The stork, of course (not to mention Attila), was right. The Huns' precocious skill at taking fortified strongholds prevailed, and Aquileia fell to them in short order. Its capture opened up the main route into north-eastern Italy.

The horde then followed the ancient Roman roads west across the Po Plain. One of the political heartlands of the western Empire and agriculturally rich, this region was endowed with many prosperous cities. Now, as in the Balkans, one after the other these cities fell to the Huns, and they took in swift succession Padua, Mantua, Vicenza, Verona, Brescia and Bergamo (map 13). Now Attila was at the gates of Milan, a long-time imperial capital. The siege was protracted, but again Attila triumphed, and another centre of Empire was looted and sacked. A fragment of Priscus' history preserves a nice vignette:

When [Attila] saw [in Milan] in a painting the Roman Emperors sitting upon golden thrones and Scythians lying dead before their feet, he sought out a painter and ordered him to paint Attila upon a throne and the Roman emperors heaving sacks upon their shoulders and pouring out gold before his feet.

But, as in Gaul the previous year, Attila's Italian campaign failed to go entirely to plan. Papal sources and Hollywood scriptwriters love to focus on one incident in particular when, after the capture of Milan, Pope Leo, as part of a peace embassy that included the Prefect Trygetius and ex-consul Avienus, met Attila to try to persuade him not to attack the city of Rome. In the end, the Huns did turn back, retreating to Hungary once again.

In some circles this went down as a great personal triumph for the Pope in face-to-face diplomacy. Reality was more prosaic. Other forces apart from the God-guided Leo were at work. Attila's Italian campaign, essentially a series of sieges, lacked substantial logistic support; and in their often cramped conditions the Hunnic army was vulnerable in more ways than one. The chronicler Hydatius put it succinctly: The Huns who had been plundering Italy and who had also stormed a

number of cities, were victims of divine punishment, being visited with heaven-sent disasters: famine and some kind of disease.' By the time Milan was captured, disease was taking a heavy toll, and food running dangerously short. Also, Constantinople now had a new ruler, the emperor Marcian, and his forces, together with what Aetius could put together, were far from idle: 'In addition, [the Huns] were slaughtered by auxiliaries sent by the Emperor Marcian and led by Aetius, and at the same time they were crushed in their settlements by both heaven-sent disasters and the army of Marcian.'<sup>62</sup> It looks as though, while the Hunnic army in Italy was being harassed by Aetius leading a joint east-west force, other eastern forces were launching a raid north of the Danube, into Attila's heartland. The combination was deadly, and, as in the previous year, the Hun had no choice but to retreat. With some kind of peace or truce in operation, his army rolled back into central Europe.<sup>63</sup>

If 451 was itself no more than a tactical check, two major defeats in as many years put a substantial dent in the great conqueror's reputation. These western campaigns were much more difficult to mount, in fact, than Attila's Balkan adventures of the previous decade. The Hunnic Empire did not have the bureaucratic machinery of its Roman counterpart, however lumbering that might be. As far as we know, it ran to one Roman-supplied secretary at a time, and a prisoner called Rusticius who was kept for his skill at writing letters in Greek and Latin. Nothing suggests that the Huns had any equivalent, therefore, of the Romans' capacity for planning and putting in place the necessary logistic support, in terms of food and fodder, for major campaigns. No doubt, when the word went out to assemble for war, each warrior was expected to bring a certain amount of food along with him, but as the campaign dragged on, the Hunnic army was bound to be living mainly off the land. Hence, in campaigns over longer distances, the difficulties involved in maintaining the army as an effective fighting force increased exponentially. Fatigue as well as the likelihood of food shortages and disease increased with distance. There was also every chance that the army would spread so widely over an unfamiliar landscape in search of supplies that it would be difficult to concentrate for battle. In 447, during the widest-reaching of the Balkan campaigns, for their first major battle Attila's armies had marched west along the northern line of the Haemus Mountains, crossed them, then moved south towards Constantinople, then south-

west to the Chersonesus for their second: a total distance of something like 500 kilometres. In 451, the army had to cover the distance from Hungary to Orléans, about 1,200 kilometres; and in 452 from Hungary to Milan, perhaps 800, but this time they were laying siege as they went, which made them yet more susceptible to disease.<sup>64</sup> As many historians have commented, in campaigns covering such vast distances into the western Empire, Attila and his forces were almost bound to experience serious setbacks.

But Attila didn't learn the lesson. Early in 453, he was on the eve of launching yet another destructive campaign across the European landscape, when finally the scourge of God went to meet his employer. He had just taken another wife (we don't know how many he had in total). On his wedding night he drank too much, burst a blood vessel and died. His bride was too scared to raise the alarm, and was found beside the corpse in the morning. The funeral was an orgy of mourning and glorification, as Jordanes describes:

His body was placed ... in state in a silken tent ... The best horsemen of the entire tribe of the Huns rode around in circles ... and told of his deeds[:] 'The Chief of the Huns, King Attila, born of his father Mundiuch, lord of the bravest tribes, sole possessor of the Scythian and German realms - powers previously unknown - captured cities and terrified both empires of the Roman world and, appeased by their entreaties, took annual tribute to save the rest from plunder. And when he had accomplished all this ... he fell not by wound of the foe, nor by treachery of friends, but in the midst of his nation at peace, happy in his joy and without sense of pain.'

When the wake had finished:

In the secrecy of the night they buried his body in the earth. They bound his coffins, the first with gold, the second with silver and the third with the strength of iron ... iron because he subdued the nations, gold and silver because he received the honours of both empires. They also added the arms of foemen won in the fight, trappings of rare worth, sparkling with various gems, and ornaments of all sorts ... then ... they slew those appointed to the work.<sup>65</sup>

### The Huns and Rome

THE FULL EFFECT upon the Roman world of the rise of the Hunnic Empire can be broken down into three phases. The first, as we saw in Chapters 4 and 5, generated two great moments of crisis on the frontier for the Roman Empire, during 376-80 and 405-8, forcing it to accept upon its soil the establishment of enclaves of unsubdued barbarians. The existence of these enclaves in turn created new and, as we saw in Chapter 6, hugely damaging centrifugal forces within the Empire's body politic. In the second phase, in the generation before Attila, the Huns evolved from invaders into empire-builders in central Europe, and the flow of refugees into Roman territory ceased. The Huns wanted subjects to exploit, and strove to bring potential candidates under control. In this era, too, Constantius and Aetius were able to make use of Hunnic power to control the immigrant groups who had previously crossed the Empire's frontier to escape from the Huns. Since none of these groups was actually destroyed, however, the palliative effects of phase two of the Hunnic impact upon the Roman world by no means outweighed the damage done in phase one.

Attila's massive military campaigns of the 440s and early 450s mark the third phase in Hunnic-Roman relations. Their effects, as one might expect, were far-reaching. The east Roman Empire's Balkan provinces were devastated, with thousands killed as one stronghold after another was taken. As the remains of Nicopolis ad Istrum so graphically show, Roman administration might be restored but not so the Latin- and Greek-speaking landowning class that had grown up over the preceding four centuries. The Gallic campaign of 451, and particularly the assault upon Italy in 452, inflicted enormous damage upon those unfortunate enough to find themselves in the Huns' path.

But if we step back from the immediate drama and consider the Roman state in broader terms, Attila's campaigns, though serious, were not life-threatening. The eastern half of the Roman Empire depended on the tax it collected from a rich arc of provinces stretching from Asia Minor to Egypt, territories out of reach of the Huns. For all the latter's siege technology, the triple landwalls surrounding Constantinople made the eastern capital impregnable; and the Huns had no navy to take them across the narrow straits that separated the Balkans from the rich provinces of Asia. A similar situation prevailed in the west. By

the time of Attila, it was already feeling a heavy financial strain, as we have seen, but given the logistic limitations of the Hunnic military machine, Attila came nowhere near to conquering it. In fact, far more serious damage was indirectly inflicted upon the structures of Empire by the influx of armed immigrants between 376 and 408. Moreover, it was again the indirect effects of the age of Attila that posed the real threat to the integrity of the west Roman state. Because he had to concentrate on dealing with Attila, Aetius had less time and fewer resources for tackling other threats to the Roman west in the 440s. And these other threats cost the western Empire much more dearly than the Hunnic invasions of 451 and 452. The first and most serious loss was the enforced abandonment of the reconquest of North Africa from the Vandals.

In such circumstances, most unfortunately, Aetius could give little help to the Iberian peninsula. There, the departure of the Vandals in 429 had seen some restoration of Roman order, and some reclamation of the revenues that had been lost in the 410s. The Hispanic provinces were rich and well developed, and, if no match for the abundance of North Africa, were still a valued contributor to western coffers. In the 410s, most of the peninsula had fallen out of direct Roman control except for Tarraconensis in the north-east, as the Vandals, Alans and Suevi shared out the rest. After 429, only the Suevi remained in large numbers, confined to the least prosperous north-western upland zone of Gallaecia. Aetius, like his predecessors, was happy to leave them there, seeing no need to risk valuable troops for its recovery.<sup>66</sup> Instead, he concentrated his efforts on restoring order and on maintaining the flow of funds from the richer provinces abandoned by the Vandals and Alans, until he was interrupted by Geiseric's seizure of Carthage.

Under their new king Rechila, who succeeded his father in 438, the Suevi took advantage of Aetius' preoccupation with North Africa to expand their dominion. In 439, they moved out of Gallaecia to take Merida, the main city of the neighbouring province of Lusitania. In 440, they captured Aetius' military commander and main representative in the peninsula, the *comes* (count) Censorius. In 441, they took Seville and extended their control over the whole of Baetica and Carthaginiensis. The lack of any concerted response from Aetius, who was now frantically gathering his forces in Sicily, gave local self-help groups, the Bagaudae, the chance to undermine central control in parts of Tarraconensis, the one province still in imperial hands. As had been

the case in Gaul, these uprisings were probably assertions of local power at a time when the imperial grip was perceived to be slipping. At least one of the revolts, led by one Basilius in Tyriasso (Tirasona) in 449, seems to have favoured a Suevic takeover, perhaps because it seemed the best way to guarantee peace, just as Gallic landowners had supported Athaulf the Visigoth in the early 410s.

The situation in Spain went from bad to worse, then, between 439 and 441, and the flow of tax revenue dried up. Even after making peace with the Vandals, there was little Aetius could do. Large-scale intervention was out of the question. A series of commanders were sent to Spain: Asturius in 442, Merobaudes himself in 443, and Vitus in 446. Asturius and Merobaudes concentrated on defeating the Bagaudae, presumably so as to hold on at least to Tarraconensis. Vitus' brief was more ambitious. Repeating the strategy of the 410s, he led a combined Romano-Visigothic force into Carthaginiensis and Baetica. Our main informant, the bishop-chronicler Hydatius, complains about this army's 'plundering', but his attitude was perhaps shaped by the expedition's outcome. When Vitus' force met the Suevi in battle, it was routed. Aetius had, in fact, scraped together what Hydatius calls a 'not inconsiderable' body of troops for Vitus, in the circumstances a fair testimony to the importance he accorded to retrieving the Hispanic revenues. What he clearly could not do, however, was bring down on the Suevi the full weight of the remaining western field armies, since they had to be kept in reserve to defend the Empire against Attila. This defeat confirmed the Suevi in their possession of most of the peninsula; and once again the bulk of Hispanic revenues were lost.<sup>67</sup>

Roman Britain, too, was in its death throes. Although, despite the letter of Honorius in 410 'urging [the British] to fend for themselves' (p. 245), the Empire had no pretensions to direct control there, Roman life had survived in parts of the province, and there was a fair amount of informal contact between Romano-Britons and their continental counterparts. In 429, then again in the early 440s, Bishop Germanus of Auxerre made trips to the island to help native Christians combat the influence of Pelagian heretics.<sup>68</sup> But heresy wasn't the only problem facing this last generation of Romano-Britons: raiders from Ireland (the Scots) and Scotland (the Picts) were troubling the western and northern fringes of the province, and Saxons from across the North Sea also took advantage of Romano-British isolation to start helping themselves to its wealth. The latter had been a worry since at least the third

century, and their incursions had prompted the construction of massive fortifications along the eastern and southern shores. Some of them still stand today, notably the forts of Portchester and Caerleon. We don't know who was exercising authority in the troubled world of sub-Roman Britain, but for a generation or so the cities continued to function, still producing at least some tax revenues in kind.<sup>66</sup>

A sixth-century British source, the monk Gildas, reports in his appropriately named *On the Ruin of Britain* that power eventually fell into the hands of an unnamed tyrant, whom Bede names as Vortigern. He and a 'council' (perhaps representatives from the surviving city councils) decided that employing Saxon mercenaries was the solution to the problems of the much threatened, much raided, Romano-British. The story of what happened next is told in outline by Gildas, who was writing a moral tale for his own times, but, as far as it goes, the account is credible enough.<sup>70</sup>

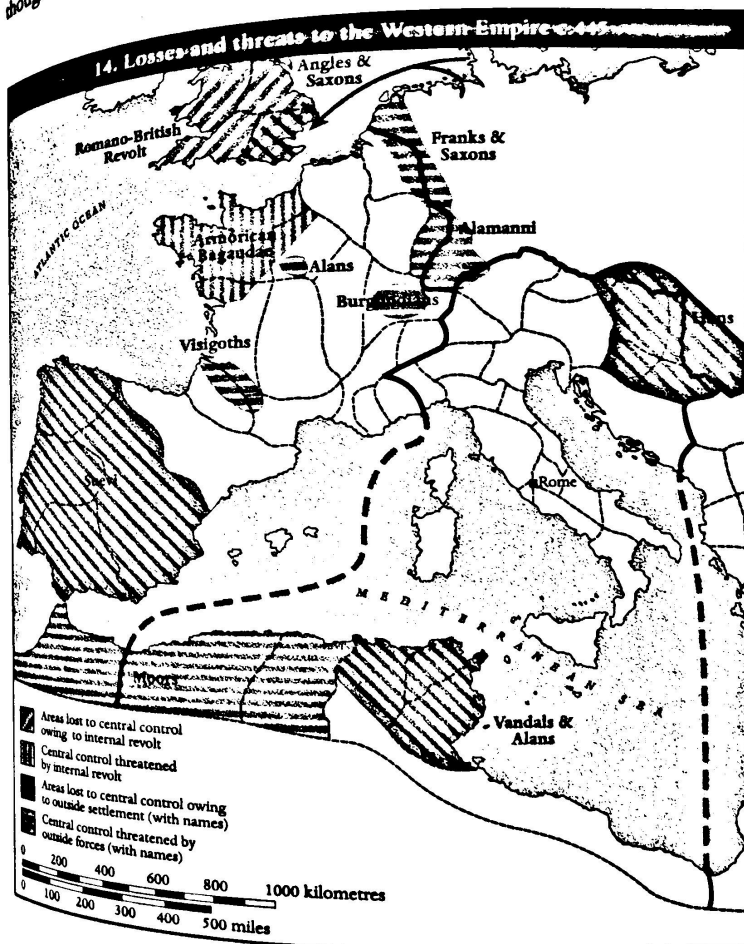
The [Saxons] ... asked to be given supplies, falsely representing themselves as soldiers ready to undergo extreme dangers for their excellent hosts. The supplies were granted and for a long time 'shut the dog's mouth'. Then they again complained that their monthly allowance was insufficient ... and swore that they would break their agreement and plunder the whole island unless more lavish payment were heaped upon them. There was no delay; they put their threats into immediate effect.

And the result:

All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants – church leaders, priests and people alike, as the swords glinted all around and the flames crackled ... In the middle of the squares the foundation-stones of high walls and towers that had been torn from their lofty base, holy altars, fragments of corpses covered with a purple crust of congealed blood looked as though they had been mixed up in some dreadful wine-press.

Gildas does not date the revolt – actually, he doesn't explicitly date anything – but two chronicles written in Gaul, whose knowledge of events in Britain demonstrates the continued cross-Channel contact also evident in the *Life of St Germanus*, note that conditions turned seriously nasty in what remained of Roman Britain round about the

year 440. Faced with an ever-worsening situation, the Romano-British made one final appeal to be taken back under the imperial wing, writing formally to Aetius. The date of the letter is controversial, but Gildas refers to Aetius at that point as 'three times consul'. Aetius became consul for the third time in 446, so if Gildas' usage is accurate, the appeal arrived just as he was anxiously scanning the Danube for early signs of the brewing Hunnic tempest. Even if Gildas is wrong, though, the general point holds. Aetius was facing too many threats





elsewhere to be able to answer the last desperate call of Roman Britain.<sup>71</sup>

The picture was bleak. The western Empire had by 452 lost a substantial percentage of its provinces (map 14): the whole of Britain, most of Spain, the richest provinces of North Africa, those parts of south-western Gaul ceded to the Visigoths, plus south-eastern Gaul ceded to the Burgundians. Furthermore, much of the rest had also seen serious fighting in the last decade or so, and the revenues from these areas too would have been substantially reduced.<sup>72</sup> The problem of diminishing funds had become overwhelming. The Huns' indirect role in this process of attrition, in having originally pushed many of the armed immigrants across the frontier, did far more harm than any damage directly inflicted by Attila.

## PART THREE

# FALL OF EMPIRES

## THE FALL OF THE HUNNIC EMPIRE

THE FALL OF ATILA'S EMPIRE is an extraordinary story in its own right. Up to about AD 350, the Huns had figured not at all in European history. During 350–410, the only Huns most Romans had encountered were a few raiding parties. Ten years later, Huns in significant numbers had established themselves west of the Carpathian Mountains on the Great Hungarian Plain, but they still functioned mostly as useful allies to the Roman state. In 441, when Attila and Bleda launched their first attack across the Roman frontier, the ally revealed his new colours. In forty years, the Huns had risen from nowhere to European superpower. By anyone's standards, this was spectacular. But the collapse of Attila's Empire was more spectacular still. By 469, just sixteen years after his death, the last of the Huns were seeking asylum inside the eastern Roman Empire. Their extinction would cause deep reverberations in the Roman west.

### *Empire to Extinction*

RECONSTRUCTING the collapse of Hunnic dominion in central Europe is a tricky proposition. Our old friend Priscus told the story in some detail, but since there was little diplomacy involved in the fall, his account hardly made it into Constantine VII's *Excerpts concerning Embassies* (see p. 306). For the most part we have to rely on one of the most intriguing historical works to survive from late antiquity: the *Gothic History*, or *Getica*, of Jordanes, whose voice we have already heard in earlier chapters. About ten pages of text (half of it notes) in the standard edition provide the only coherent existing account of the fall of Attila's Empire.<sup>1</sup>

Jordanes was a man of Gothic descent living in Constantinople around the year 550, so he was writing nearly a century after the events we're interested in. At this point he was a monk, but had

previously served as a secretary to a Roman commander on the Danube, so was not without relevant experience. He tells us in the preface to the *Getica* that his history of the Goths is largely an abridgement of a lost history written by an Italo-Roman called Cassiodorus. Cassiodorus was adviser to Theoderic the Amal, Ostrogothic king of Italy, in the 520s. Jordanes says that he had access to Cassiodorus' history for just three days when compiling his own and that, as he puts it, 'the words I recall not, but the sense and deeds related I think I retain entire'. Some have sensed something a bit fishy in this, arguing either that Jordanes had much greater access to his model than he pretends, or that he had very little to do with him and was trying to use Cassiodorus' name for his own purposes. These hypotheses founder, however, on their proponents' failure to come up with a convincing reason for Jordanes to have lied.<sup>2</sup> I am confident that he is broadly telling the truth in claiming to have followed Cassiodorus' outline closely. The *Getica* corresponds well enough with the few things we know from elsewhere about Cassiodorus' history.<sup>3</sup>

But even if Jordanes' preface is not disguising some massive deception, this doesn't make the *Getica* a reliable source. Cassiodorus wrote his history of the Goths for the court of the Ostrogothic king Theoderic the Amal, and this has a significant bearing on the narrative of Hunnic collapse that has come down to us in the *Getica*. Above all, and as you might expect, it is a thoroughly Gotho-centric account. Only the story of the Goths removing themselves from Hunnic overlordship is told in any detail in its pages, and even the Huns appear only incidentally. More specifically, Cassiodorus had to tell his Gothic history as his particular Gothic king wanted it told. As a result, it contains two historical distortions.

First, it claims that all the Goths who didn't flee from the Huns in AD 376 by crossing over into the Roman Empire immediately fell under Hunnic control. This is nonsense. We actually know of seven groups of Goths, other than the Greuthungi and Tervingi who sought asylum from the emperor Valens in 376 (and there is no reason to suppose that even this list is exhaustive):

1. The Amal-led Goths, who were under Hunnic control by the time of Attila and were presently ruled by Theoderic.
2. The Goths of Radagaisus who invaded Italy in 405/6 and

- eventually became part of Alaric's new Visigothic group (see Chapter 5).
3. The Goths of Pannonia, detached by Roman military action from Hunnic hegemony in the 420s, and resettled by the Romans in Thrace; quite possibly the ancestors of group 6 below.
  4. The Goths of a king called Bigelis, who unsuccessfully invaded the east Roman Empire sometime between 466 and 471.
  5. The Goths operating in the train of Dengizich, son of Attila, when he invaded east Roman territory in the late 460s.
  6. A large group of Goths already settled in Thrace as Roman allies in about 470.
  7. Two other, smaller, Gothic groups established in enclaves around the Black Sea: the Tetraxitae of the Cimmerian Bosphorus and the Goths of Dory in the south-western Crimea.<sup>4</sup>

In concentrating solely upon group 1, therefore, the *Getica*'s historical vision substantially simplifies Gothic history.

Second – and closely related to the first point – the *Getica* overstates the historical importance of the Amal dynasty from which Theoderic, Cassiodorus' employer, was descended. By dividing the Goths into those who were conquered by the Huns in 376 and those who fled, the *Getica* can maintain that the Amal family had long ruled every Goth who did not enter Roman territory during the reign of Valens. The Amals were later responsible for the creation of the Ostrogoths, as mentioned earlier, but this happened between about 460 and 490. Nothing suggests that the Amal dynasty had been anything like as prominent before it acquired this new power-base. Parvenu dynasts often pretend that they are not parvenus at all, and Theoderic was a case in point. Cassiodorus' letters consistently refer to Theoderic's family as a 'purple dynasty'; this perspective permeated Cassiodorus' history – hence its presence in the *Getica*. Furthermore, there is no reason to suppose that our list of seven groups is exhaustive: there were many Gothic 'royal' families competing at the heads of their individual warbands.<sup>5</sup> In reality the fall of the Hunnic Empire was rather more messy than Jordanes makes out.

As the *Getica* tells it, the origins of Hunnic collapse lay in a dispute over succession between Attila's sons soon after their father's sudden death. At least three of the sons figure in different sources as important

leaders in their own right – Dengizich, Ellac and Hernac – but we have no idea of how many there were in total, or of whether all or only some, were potential candidates for their father's position. The quarrel soon degenerated into civil war, which resulted in one Germanic subject group, the Gepids under their king Arderic, throwing off Hunnic domination. This presumably meant that the Gepids refused to pay any more tributes or to answer demands for military service. The rebellion was not taken lying down, the *Getica* tells us, and the outcome was a battle on an unidentified river in Pannonia called the Nedao.<sup>6</sup>

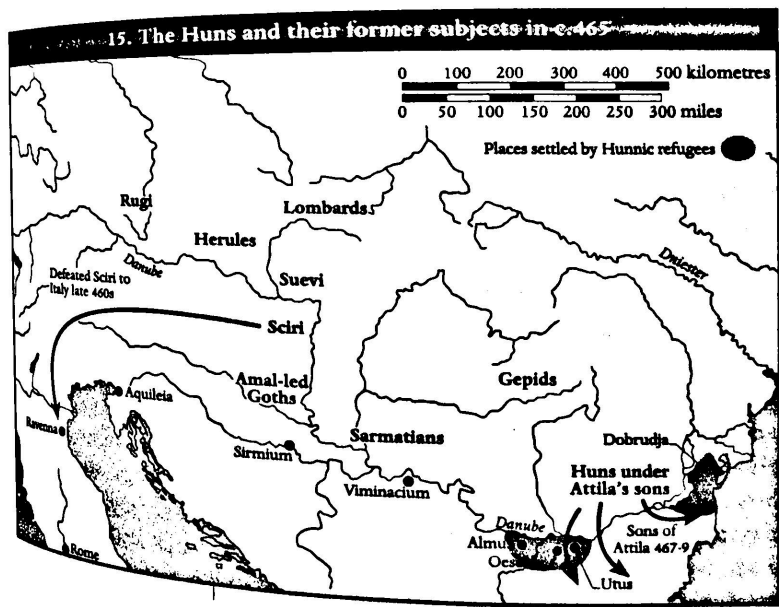
There an encounter took place between the various nations Attila had held under his sway. Kingdoms with their peoples were divided, and out of one body were made many members not responding to a common impulse. Being deprived of their head, they madly strove against each other ... And so the bravest nations tore themselves to pieces ... One might see the Goths fighting with pikes, the Gepids raging with the sword, the Rugi breaking off the spears in their own wounds, the Sueves [Suevi] fighting on foot, the Huns with bows, the Alans drawing up a battle-line of heavy-armed and the Herules of light-armed warriors. Finally, after many bitter conflicts, victory fell unexpectedly to the Gepids.

This is good breastplate-ripping stuff, but not very informative even if the outline story is plausible enough. Clearly, dynastic strife was the norm within the royal family of the Huns, once power became more centralized in the fifth century. We saw in Chapter 7 that royal refugees from previous succession struggles had ended up inside the Roman Empire in the 440s, for instance, and some were returned for execution. Jordanes is also unlikely to have given the Gepids a starring role unless it was impossible not to, especially since there was no love lost between Goths and Gepids by the sixth century.<sup>7</sup>

What's not at all clear, though, is who was on whose side in the battle, and whether there was just one big battle or a series of smaller ones. Jordanes is also a bit vague on the outcome of all this violence. He baldly reports that 'by his revolt [Arderic] freed not only his own tribe, but all the others who were equally oppressed'. But how precisely this liberation happened is open to question. When, in the battle (or battles), Attila's son Ellac was killed, Jordanes reports, the

others immediately abandoned their homes in the Middle Danube and made for lands east of the Carpathians and north of the Black Sea, handing out freedom to all the Huns' subjects, no matter whose side they had fought on.<sup>8</sup> By about the year 460, the position of the major powers in and around the Middle Danubian Plain, in so far as we can reconstruct it, was more or less as follows (map 15). The Amal-led Goths occupied an arc of territory south of the River Danube in former Roman Pannonia, stretching from Lake Balaton towards the city of Sirmium. The Gepids controlled the north-eastern stretch, including much of the old Roman province of Dacia abandoned in the third century. Between the two were the Suevi north of the Danube bend, plus the Sciri, Herules, Rugi and Sarmatians/Alans. According to a literal reading of Jordanes, thanks to the revolt of the Gepids all of these groups rapidly converted from Hunnic subjects into independent kingdoms. There are enough hints in fragments preserved elsewhere, however, and in odd details of Jordanes' account, to make it clear that, again, this is much too simple a picture.

The idea that the Huns suddenly disappeared from the Carpathian region in 453/4, for instance, is deeply misleading. In the later 450s and early 460s, they twice intervened west of the Carpathians against





the Amal-led Goths in Pannonia, as Jordanes himself tells us,<sup>9</sup> and in the later 460s Attila's remaining sons were still able to launch attacks into the Roman Empire across the Danube. If, as Jordanes reports, the Huns did leave the Middle Danube after the battle of the Nedao, they didn't go far. And while Nedao may have freed the Gepids, it clearly didn't free everyone. When the Huns, under Attila's son Dengizich, attacked the east Roman Empire for the last time in 467/8, there were still substantial numbers of Goths in his following. Priscus reports,<sup>10</sup> Jordanes also tells us that Dengizich had mobilized several groups – Ultzinzures, Angisciri, Bittugures and Bardores – for his second attack on the Amal-led Goths.<sup>11</sup> This doesn't mean that Nedao was not a significant turning-point, but it does demonstrate that Hunnic power over the other population groups of the Carpathian region wasn't suddenly extinguished.

The path to freedom of the Amal-led Goths, and most of the Huns' subjects, was not quite what Jordanes implies, either. No sudden moment of liberation freed everyone at the same time. No sudden seen, there were at least three separate groups of Goths under Hunnic dominion at Attila's death, and there had earlier been a fourth (group 3/6, p. 353), detached from Hunnic control by east Roman action and resettled in Thrace in the 420s. Group 1 had escaped by the later 450s, group 4 by the mid-460s, while group 5 never escaped at all, participating in the Huns' final attack on the Empire in 467/8. We have no equivalent information for the Huns' other subject peoples, but behind each individual group name – Suevi, Rugi, Herules, Gepids, Alans and so on – there may likewise have been several independent political units who threw off Hunnic dominion at various points between 453 and 468.

Nor should we assume that each of the separate units that emerged from the wreck of the Hunnic Empire already had its own smoothly functioning leadership at the time of Attila's death. The *Getica* reports that this was true of the Amal-led Goths, claiming that Valamer the Amal, Theoderic's uncle, had been a trusted right-hand man of Attila and that the Amal dynasty's pre-eminence over Group 1 was beyond challenge. There are good reasons for doubting both claims. Jordanes himself reports that for forty years under Hunnic hegemony, before the appearance of Valamer, this supposedly unchallengeable dynasty hadn't actually ruled any Goths at all. He also tells some interesting stories about a supposedly Hunnic ruler by the name of Balamber,

who defeated several Gothic rulers, in particular Vinitharius and Hunimund. Many chronological inconsistencies fizzle out once it is recognized that the accounts of Balamber's exploits probably describe how Valamer first consolidated his hold over the Amal-Goths. Balamber doesn't appear in any other sources; and in Greek, Valamer is written 'Balamer'. The stories tell of him defeating two rival Gothic ruling lines in the persons of Vinitharius and Hunimund, together with the latter's son Thorismund. Gesimund, the brother of Thorismund, accepted Valamer's overlordship rather than continuing the contest, while Thorismund's son Beremund fled west into the Roman Empire. Instead of an Amal dynasty with a unique, long-established prestige at the time of Attila's death, then, we need to envisage several competing petty Gothic warlords, each with their own warbands. It was Valamer, it seems, who first united them, in some instances by direct military action (as in the killing of Hunimund); in others, as with Gesimund's surrender, by conciliation; and in yet others, by a mixture of the two – Valamer killed Vinitharius, then married his granddaughter.<sup>12</sup> My best guess is that all this political restructuring happened *after* the death of Attila. The process generated a much larger Gothic force, better able to resist Hunnic domination, and it is hard to think that Attila in his pomp would have tolerated it.<sup>13</sup>

Quite clearly, then, not all of the Huns' subjects came in neat units, with established leaderships ready and waiting to recapture their independence as soon as the great man died. The Gepids perhaps did, and this might explain why they were able to regain their independence so quickly. But other groups that we see asserting their autonomy after Attila's death had been generated only recently: on the hoof, as it were, around the leadership of new men. The emergence of the kingdom of the Sciri, for instance, was far from straightforward. In the 460s, they were ruled by the same Edeco whom we met in the last chapter as one of Attila's trusted inner circle, the man the east Romans had tried to bribe into assassinating the then Hunnic leader. Edeco was supported by two sons, Odovacar and Onoulph. As the Hunnic Empire collapsed, Edeco clearly managed to reinvent himself, turning from trusted Hunnic henchman into the king of the Sciri. Interestingly, he probably wasn't a Sciri by birth. His sons are described as having a Scirian mother, but he himself is labelled as either a Hun or a Thuringian. The latter – being more specific – is perhaps more likely to be correct. What qualified Edeco for leadership of the Sciri was not

his origin, then, but a marriage alliance probably with the daughter of a Scirian bigwig, combined with his pre-eminence at Attila's court. For the other groups we have no information; but I suspect that plenty before the successor kingdoms to the Hunnic Empire could emerge into the light of history.<sup>14</sup>

Putting all these fragments together suggests a rather different account of the collapse of the Hunnic Empire from that given by Jordanes. If the reassertion of independence on the part of at least some of the subject peoples had to be preceded by major political readjustments, this tells us that the Hunnic Empire eased towards extinction as the Huns gradually lost control of those peoples.

The emergence of the new independent groups then set in motion the final stage in the process of Hunnic extinction. The Huns had gathered most of them together on the Great Hungarian Plain, this unprecedented concentration of armed groups creating there a hugely powerful war machine.<sup>15</sup> In the Roman period, the area had been divided between just Sarmatians, Suevi and Vandals – Roman policy took great care to prevent overcrowding in the immediate frontier area, for fear that it would lead to violence. The removal of Hunnic domination created just the situation that these old Roman policies were designed to prevent: a concentration of competitive armed groups in a relatively small area. So battles for independence naturally evolved into a fight for regional hegemony in the 460s, as the new kingdoms took each other on in a struggle for mastery on the Danube.

Again, the only coherent narrative is to be found in the *Getica*, which of course presents it as a triumph for the Amal-led Goths.<sup>16</sup> As Jordanes tells it, these quickly came to blows with the Suevi, over whom they won a great victory. The Suevi then stirred up the other regional powers against the Goths, particularly the Sciri, who managed to kill Valamer in a first bout of fighting. The Goths, however, took a ferocious revenge, destroying the Sciri as an independent power. This led most of the rest – the Suevi, the remaining Sciri, Rugi, Gepids, Sarmatians 'and others' – to unite against the Goths. The result was a second great battle, on a second unidentified river in Pannonia, the Bolia, where, as Jordanes tells us:

The party of the Goths was found to be so much the stronger that the plain was drenched in the blood of their fallen foes and

looked like a crimson sea. Weapons and corpses, piled up like hills, covered the plain for more than ten miles. When the Goths saw this, they rejoiced with joy unspeakable, because by this great slaughter of their foes they had avenged the blood of Valamer their king.<sup>17</sup>

Other sources provide just about enough information to confirm Jordanes' version. A fragment of Priscus' history records that, before the showdown, the Sciri and Amal-led Goths both sent embassies to Constantinople to try to procure east Roman assistance.<sup>18</sup> The destruction of the Sciri also figures in other sources. But whether and to what extent the Amal-led Goths were always victorious, we don't really know.

The violence and instability only began to ease off a little in the region as some of the competing groups were eliminated. The Scirian kingdom lost its independence in the late 460s, and in 473 the Amal-led Goths left the area to try their luck in the east Roman Empire. None of this came soon enough, however, to save the sons of Attila. As the events of the 450s and 460s unfolded, their position was fatally undermined. Each assertion of independence meant that another subject people had stopped paying their annual tributes. This was bad enough, but then the new kingdoms started to take the initiative, looking to maximize their positions at the expense both of each other and of the Huns. The transformation from victors to victims is well illustrated in the two wars that the sons of Attila fought, according to Jordanes, against the Amal-led Goths. In the first they attacked them as 'fugitive slaves', with the aim of reasserting their own hegemony and tribute rights. In the second, they were seeking to prevent some of the smaller groups settled in Pannonia from falling under Gothic dominion.<sup>19</sup> All the other major groups we hear about were doing much the same, so that the Huns' power-base was steadily eroded.

By the mid-460s the two surviving sons, Dengizich and Hernac, were desperate. The loss of subject peoples, combined with the increasing empowerment of groups like the Amal-led Goths, left their position north of the Danube untenable. The only option open to them was to seek an accommodation with the Roman Empire. But Dengizich got it wrong – perhaps he demanded too much. In 469 he was defeated by the Roman general Anagastes, and his head publicly displayed at Constantinople. Hernac and his followers, perhaps less

greedy, were eventually resettled beside the Danube in northern Dobrudja (modern Romania), and some other Hunnic remnants settled in and around the fortresses of Oescus, Utus and Almus. Independent Hunnic power north of the Danube had ended. The demise of Attila's realm had been swift and total.

### *Riding the Tiger*

DESPITE ITS MANY limitations, then, the *Getica*'s account allows us to reconstruct some of the key stages in the process of Hunnic collapse. Over the years, many explanations have been offered for this extraordinary phenomenon. Historians of earlier eras tended to argue that it was testament to the extraordinary personal capacities of Attila: the Empire could only exist with him at the helm. Edward Thompson, by contrast, rooted the Huns' demise in the divisive social effects of all the wealth they acquired from the Roman Empire.<sup>20</sup> There is something in both of these theories. Attila the Hun, as we have seen, was an extraordinary operator, and no doubt the gold extracted from Rome was not distributed entirely evenly among his people. But a full understanding of the Hunnic Empire must turn on its relations with its largely Germanic subjects. As already suggested, it was the ability to suck in so many of these militarized groups that underlay the sudden explosion of Hunnic power in the 420s–40s. After Attila's death, likewise, it was his successors' increasing inability to maintain control over those same groups that spelled their own decline.

The key starting-point is that the Hunnic Empire was not generally enrolled voluntarily. All the evidence we have suggests that non-Hunnic groups became caught up in it through a combination of conquest and intimidation. In the time of Attila, the Akatziri were the latest to fall into the Empire's orbit. We took in the first half of the story in Chapter 7, when the east Roman ambassador gave the best gifts to the wrong king. Priscus tells us what happened next:

Kouridachus, the senior [king of the Akatziri] in office ... called in Attila against his fellow kings. Attila without delay sent a large force, destroyed some, and forced the rest to submit. He then summoned Kouridachus to share in the prizes of victory. But he, suspecting a plot, declared that it was hard for a man to come

into the sight of a god ... In this way Kouridachus remained amongst his own folk and saved his realm, while all the rest of the Akatzirian people submitted to Attila.<sup>21</sup>

Attila then sent his eldest son to rule over the conquered. The passage reveals that while Attila was capable of deft political manoeuvring when the occasion demanded, the basic tool of Hunnic imperial expansion was military conquest. It was, of course, to avoid Hunnic domination that the Tervingi and Greuthungi had come to the Danube in the summer of 376 in the first place. And it was after a savage mauling at the hands of the Huns in the 430s that the Burgundians also ended up in the Roman Empire. All this is consistent with the fact that there was, as we have seen, one way, and one way only, of quitting Attila's Empire: warfare.<sup>22</sup>

We don't have all the information we might like on relations between the Hunnic conquerors and their various subjects. Pride of place has tended to be given to a story told by Priscus, often seen as illustrating the ethnic and social mobility that was possible in the Hunnic Empire. While hanging around Attila's camp, Priscus ran into a well dressed Hun who greeted him in Greek. Upon inquiry, the 'Hun' turned out to be an ex-Roman prisoner, a former merchant captured at the fall of Viminacium in 441. In the share-out that followed he had been assigned to Onegesius and had fought in subsequent campaigns, against both the Romans and the Akatziri. He did well, won lots of booty, which he passed on to Onegesius, and was consequently freed. He'd then taken a Hunnic wife and was now a trusted companion of his former master, accustomed to dining with him. Thus a slave who did well in battle could win his freedom and be accepted in fairly exalted Hunnic circles. Not so commonly quoted is another story exposing the other side of master-slave relations under the Huns. Also during his stay at Attila's court, Priscus saw the gibbeting of two slaves who had taken the opportunity offered by the turmoil of battle to kill their master. And in fact, most of the Huns' subjects were exploited in a variety of ways and kept firmly in their place.<sup>23</sup>

A revealing fragment of Priscus' history records an incident in 467/8 during Dengizich's last attack on the east Roman Empire, when a mixed force of Goths and Huns was picked apart by Romans; they reminded the Gothic contingent of exactly how the Huns generally

behaved towards them: 'These men have no concern for agriculture, but, like wolves, attack and steal the Goths' food supplies, with the result that the latter remain in the position of slaves and themselves suffer food shortages.'<sup>24</sup> Taking the subject peoples' supplies was, of course, only part of the story. They were also used, as we have seen, to fight the Huns' wars. Few civilian prisoners are likely to have been very good at fighting, and casualty numbers during Hunnic campaigns were probably enormous. Priscus' merchant-turned-Hun certainly prospered, but his was no doubt an unusual story.

Clearly, then, the Hunnic Empire was an inherently unstable political entity, riven with tensions between rulers and ruled. Tensions of a different kind also existed between the subject peoples themselves, who had a long history of mutual aggression even before the Huns appeared. This particular instability tends to receive little coverage from historians because most of our source material comes from a Roman, Priscus, and not wider, though, and the evidence rapidly gathers itself. The greatest strength of the Hunnic Empire – the ability to increase its power by quickly consuming subject peoples – was also its greatest weakness. The Romans, for instance, were happy to exploit, whenever they could, the fact that these subject peoples were not there of their own free will. In the 420s, the east Roman counteraction against the rising Hunnic power in Pannonia was to remove from their control a large number of Goths whom they then settled in Thrace.<sup>25</sup> And an early fragment of Priscus tells us:<sup>26</sup> 'When Rua was king of the Huns, the Amilzuri, Itimari, Tounsoures, Boisci and other tribes who were living near to the Danube were fleeing to fight on the side of the Romans.' This dates to the late 430s, after Rua had achieved considerable success, indicating that even success wasn't enough to guarantee the quiescence of subject groups. The start of a new reign was a moment of particular stress. The first campaign of Rua's successors, Attila and Bleda, when they came to power in 440, was not against the Romans: 'When [at the start of their reign] they had made peace with the Romans, Attila, Bleda and their forces marched through Scythia subduing the tribes there and also made war on the Sorogsi.' Reasserting your overlordship over subject groups once you had established your supremacy, was probably the first priority for any new ruler of the Hunnic Empire.

The conflicts that arose after Attila's death were not exceptional, then, but inherent in the relationship between the Huns and their

subjects. When they could, Hunnic leaders tried to ensure that the Romans wouldn't stir up trouble for them in this quarter. In their first treaty with the east Romans, when the latter wanted peace on the Danube so as to be able to pursue their ambitions in North Africa, Attila and Bleda were able to ensure 'that the Romans should make no alliance with a barbarian people against the Huns when the latter were preparing for war against them'. Unlike the Roman Empire, which spent centuries dissipating the tensions of conquest turning their subjects – or, at least, the landowners among them – into full Romans, the Huns lacked the necessary stability and the bureaucratic capacity to run their subjects directly.<sup>27</sup> Instead of revolutionizing the sociopolitical structures of the conquered peoples or imposing their own, they had to rely on an indigenous leadership to continue the daily management of the subject groups. As a result, the Huns could exert only a moderate degree of dominion and interference, and even that varied from one subject people to another. The Gepids, as we have seen, had from one subject leader at the time of Attila's death, and so were their own overall leader to assert their independence. Other groups, like the Amal-led Goths, first had to produce a leader of their own before they could challenge Hunnic hegemony. Some, like the Goths in thrall to Dengizich when he invaded east Roman territory in the 460s, never managed to do so. But even these, still dominated by Dengizich in 468, had their own subchieftains.

If the sources were more numerous and more informative, I suspect that the narrative would show the Hunnic Empire peeling apart like an onion after 453, with different subject layers asserting independence at different times, in inverse relation to the degree of domination the Huns had previously exercised over their lives. The two key variables were, first, the extent to which the subjects' political structure had been left intact; and second – I strongly suspect but cannot prove – their distance from the heartland of the Empire where Attila had his camps. Some groups, settled close to the Huns' own territories, were kept on a very tight rein, with any propensity to unified leadership suppressed. Groups living further away preserved more of their own political structures and were less readily controlled. In the time of Attila, the Franks and the Akatziri defined the geographical limits of his marginal influence, while groups in between such as the Thuringians, Goths, Gepids, Suevi, Sciri, Herules, Sarmatians and Alans faced differing degrees of closer control.<sup>28</sup>

Archaeological evidence from Attila's Empire offers us a further perspective on relations between its subjects and rulers. As we saw in Chapter 7, this mainly takes the form of Germanic or seemingly Germanic cemeteries; a striking feature of the excavated material is the contrast between the large number of unfurnished burials and a smaller number of rich ones. These rich burials are not just quite rich: they are staggeringly so. They contain a huge array of gold fittings and ornamentation, the stars of the collections being the cloisonné and garnet jewellery in which the stones are mounted in their own gold cases to give an effect not unlike mosaic. This kind of work would later become the mark of elites everywhere in the late and post-Roman periods. For instance, the style of the cloisonné jewellery found in the Sutton Hoo ship burial of the early seventh century in East Anglia originally gained its hold on elite imaginations in Hunnic Europe.<sup>29</sup> One burial at Apahida (modern Transylvania) produced over sixty gold items, including a solid gold eagle that fitted on to its owner's saddle. Every other piece of this individual's horse equipment was likewise made of gold, and he himself was decked from head to foot in golden jewellery. There are other similarly wealthy burials, as well as others containing smaller numbers of gold items.<sup>30</sup>

The presence of so much gold in Germanic central and eastern Europe is highly significant. Up to the birth of Christ, social differentiation in the Germanic world manifested itself funerarily, if at all, only by the presence in certain graves of larger than usual numbers of handmade pots, or of slightly more decorative bronze and iron safety-pins. By the third and fourth centuries AD, some families were burying their dead with silver safety-pins, lots of beads, and perhaps some wheel-turned pottery; but gold was not being used to distinguish even elite burials at this point – the best they could manage was a little silver.<sup>31</sup> The Hunnic Empire changed this, and virtually overnight. The gold-rich burials of the 'Danubian style' mark a sudden explosion of gold grave goods into this part of Europe. There is no doubt where the gold came from: what we're looking at in the grave goods of fifth-century Hungary is the physical evidence of the transfer of wealth northwards from the Roman world that we read about in Priscus and the other written sources. The Huns, as we saw in the last chapter, were after gold and other moveable wealth from the Empire – whether in the form of mercenary payments, booty or, especially, annual tributes. Clearly, large amounts of gold were recycled into the jewel-

lery and appliques found in their graves. The fact that many of these were the rich burials of Germans indicates that the Huns did not just hang on to the gold themselves, but distributed quantities of it to the leaders of their Germanic subjects as well. These leaders, consequently, became very rich indeed.

The reasoning behind this strategy was that, if Germanic leaders could be given a stake in the successes of the Hunnic Empire, then dissent would be minimized and things would run relatively smoothly. Gifts of gold to the subject princes would help lubricate the politics of Empire and fend off thoughts of revolt. Since there are quite a few burials containing gold items, these princes must have passed on some of the gold to favoured supporters.<sup>32</sup> The gold thus reflects the politics of Attila's court. (It's nice to think that the prince buried at Apahida may have been one that Priscus encountered.) Equally important, the role of such gold distributions in countering the endemic internal instability, combined with what we know of the source of that gold, underlines the role of predatory warfare in keeping afloat the leaky bark that was the Hunnic ship of state.

First and foremost, success in warfare built up the reputation of the current leader as a figure of overwhelming power. Witness the case of Attila and the sword of Mars. But there is every reason to suppose that military success had been just as important for his predecessors. A reputation for power brought with it the capacity to intimidate subject peoples, and it was also military success, of course, that provided the gold and other booty that kept their leaders in line – although the speed with which subject groups opted out of the Empire after Attila's death suggests that the payments did not compensate for the burden of exploitation. In contrast to the Roman Empire, which, as we have seen, attempted to keep population levels low in frontier areas so as to minimize the potential for trouble, the Hunnic Empire sucked in subject peoples in huge numbers.<sup>33</sup> The concentration of such a great body of manpower generated a magnificent war machine, which had to be used – it contained far too many inner tensions to be allowed to lie idle. The number of Hunnic subject groups outnumbered the Huns proper, probably in a ratio of several to one. It was essential to keep the subject peoples occupied, or restless elements would be looking for outlets for their energy and the Empire's rickety structure might begin to crumble.



WE HAVE ARRIVED at a very different perspective on Attila the Hun. As is often the case, the factor that made him so powerful was at the same time his greatest liability. The military force that brushed aside the armies of the east Roman Empire in the 440s was itself highly unstable. The victories with which it provided him cemented Attila's control in the short term, but it was riven with internal tension. Further victories were essential, to maintain his dominance. Should his reputation start to crack, then his subjects would desert into the welcoming arms of the Romans. Attila was the greatest barbarian conqueror in European history, but he was riding a tiger of unparalleled ferocity. Should his grip falter, he would be mauled to death.

To my mind, this in turn explains his otherwise mysterious turn to the west at the end of the 440s. Between 441 and 447, Attila's armies had ransacked the Balkans except for some small areas protected by two major obstacles: the Peloponnese because of its geographical isolation, and the city of Constantinople because of its stunning land defences. The eastern Empire was on its knees: the annual tribute it was having to pay out was the largest ever expended by a factor of ten. The Huns had squeezed out of Constantinople just about everything they were likely to get; at the very least, further campaigning against it was bound to run into the law of diminishing returns. But there on the Hungarian Plain Attila sat, still surrounded by a huge military machine that could not be left idle. With nothing to attack in the Balkans, another target had to be found. Attila turned to the west, in other words, because he'd exhausted the decent targets available in the east.

This suggests a final judgement on the Hunnic Empire. Politically dependent upon military victory and the flow of gold, it was bound to make war to the point of its own defeat, then be pushed by that defeat into internal crisis. The setbacks in Gaul and Italy in 451 and 452 must anyway have begun to puncture Attila's aura of invincibility. They certainly caused some diminution in the flow of gold, and some of the outlying subject peoples may already have been getting restive. Quite likely, Attila's death and the civil war between his sons provided just the opportunity they were looking for. Overall, there can be no more vivid testament to the unresolved tensions between dominant Hunnic rulers and exploited non-Hunnic subjects than the astonishing demise of Attila's Empire. The strange death of Hunnic Europe, however, was also integral to the collapse of the western Empire.

## A New Balance of Power

INSTEAD OF ONE HUGE power centred on the Great Hungarian Plain, in centuries reaching out towards the Rhine in one direction, the Black Sea in another, the Roman Empire both east and west now found itself facing a pack of successor states. Much of the time fighting amongst themselves, they also pressed periodically upon the Roman frontier. As the Empire became ever more deeply involved in the fall-out from the Hunnic collapse, the nature of Roman foreign policy on the Danube frontier began to change. In confronting their new situation, the Roman authorities had two priorities. They needed to prevent the squabbling north of the Danube from spilling over into their own territory in the form of invasions or incursions, while safeguarding that what emerged from the chaos should not be another monolithic empire.

The loss of the full text of Priscus' history prevents us from telling a continuous story from the Roman perspective, but the essence is easy enough to distil. The surviving sources refer to overflows of various kinds on to Roman territory, the result of the ferocious struggle for *Lebensraum* on the other side of the Danube. Into the western Empire large numbers of refugees now flooded, individuals and groups who had decided that life south of the river looked preferable to the continuing struggle north of it. The most famous of these refugees was Odovacar, son of Edeco and prince of the Sciri. After the Amal-led Goths destroyed the Scirian kingdom, he moved into Roman territory with a band of followers, heading first for Gaul and then for Italy, where he signed up with the Roman army. His lead was followed by many others of less distinguished origins. By the early 470s, the Roman army of Italy was dominated by central European refugees: Sciri are specifically mentioned, along with Herules, Alans and Torcilingi, who had all been recruited into its ranks.<sup>34</sup> The surviving sources give us no numbers and no precise dates for the population moves that had brought them to Italy. This perhaps suggests that we should think in terms of a steady flow of immigration and recruitment, rather than a single large-scale influx, although factors such as the destruction of Scirian independence presumably accelerated the process.

If some groups, displaced in dribs and drabs, were merely fleeing the carnage north of the Danube, others were seeking to create their

own enclaves on Roman soil – perceiving this, it would seem, as the easier option than continuing to compete on the Hungarian plain. By the mid-460s, a number of groups were finding the competition too hot to handle, and three separate incursions on to east Roman territory took place in quick succession. In 466 or just afterwards, the Gothic king Bigelis (of the fourth group mentioned on page 353) led his followers south of the Danube, where he was defeated, Jordanes tells us.<sup>35</sup> At more or less the same time a band of Huns led by a certain Hormidac raided Dacia, penetrating as far as the city of Serdica. There they were defeated by the east Roman general Anthemius.<sup>36</sup> It was at this point too that Attila's son Dengizich made his play for a piece of east Roman territory; as we have seen, he too failed to prosper. The arrival of these armed bands more or less coincides with the war between the Amal-led Goths and their rivals on the Middle Danubian Plain, and, like the smaller flow of refugees into the western Empire, was perhaps caused by this new upsurge of violence.<sup>37</sup>

At the same time the new kingdoms were also, to an extent, carrying on from where the Huns had left off. Thanks to one of the two surviving fragments from Priscus' history that deal with the aftermath of the fall of Attila's Empire, we know that Valamer and his Goths invaded the east Roman Empire to extract an annual subsidy from it. By the early 460s, Priscus records, this amounted to 300 pounds of gold<sup>38</sup> – a much smaller amount than was extracted by Attila at the height of his power (2,100 pounds) and less than half that paid to the Hun at the start of his reign. But it was not an insignificant sum, and if Valamer were to succeed in expanding his power-base further, there was always the chance that he would up his demands just as the Huns had done. Since the authorities in Constantinople were probably having to pay annual subsidies to some of the other successor kingdoms as well, they had to tread very carefully. The new kingdoms had the potential to amalgamate into something just as nasty as Attila's Empire. Some insight into Roman attitudes towards this potential problem is provided by the other relevant fragment to survive from Priscus' history.<sup>39</sup> During the interval between the first and second bouts of fighting between the Goths and the Sciri, both sides sent embassies to Constantinople asking for assistance. No one wanted to aid the Goths, but opinion was divided as to the best course to take. One counsel was that the Romans should keep out of the conflict entirely. Eventually, it was decided to give limited support to

the Sciri. Jordanes ignores this dimension of the post-Attilan conflicts, but it's clear that all sides were not only manoeuvring with and against one another, but trying to secure Roman support as well. The fact that no one in Constantinople wanted to back them attests to the increasing power of the Amal-led Goths, who were the closest thing to a new superpower.

The Romans greeted the death of Attila as the dawn of a new era. On the night of the great Hun's death, the eastern emperor Marcian is said to have had a happy dream in which he saw Attila's bow broken in two.<sup>40</sup> However, the disappearance of a rival superpower proved not to be the end of all troubles, but a development that spawned a whole series of new problems. The prospect of a further clash of empires had vanished only to be replaced by many complicated regional conflicts with serious implications for both halves of the Roman world. And I strongly suspect that those we hear about in our motley collection of sources represent no more than the tip of the iceberg. Furthermore, the many and varied problems of refugees and invaders were as nothing compared with the broader consequences of the crash of Attila's Empire. Above all, it destroyed the balance of forces on which, by the mid-fifth century, the western Roman Empire had come to depend.

### The Fall of Aetius

As we saw in Chapter 6, the emperor Valentinian III, son of Flavius Constantius and Galla Placidia, came to the throne in 425 at the age of six. He had been put there by the armies of the eastern Empire, and had never really held the reins of power. An eight-year domination by his mother, who eventually failed in her balancing act between the commanders of the several western army groups, had given way to that of Aetius. This man's extraordinary military acumen during the 430s would both keep the western Empire afloat and cement his own hold on power. At fourteen a Roman youth was notionally an adult and could make legally binding decisions about property, but at this age in 433 Valentinian was nowhere near ready to compete for power with a tough and experienced general, especially when the Empire faced so many military problems. And by the time he might have been able to exercise authority, five or six years later, Aetius' position was

fully consolidated. By 440 it was the general, not the emperor, who was making the key decisions about policies and appointments – the very state of affairs that Placidia had laboured to avoid.

Thus, trapped within patterns of power over which he had no control, the notional emperor of the Roman west found himself a mere figurehead. The drudgery of such an existence is easy to underestimate. Never venturing out of Italy, Valentinian spent his time shuttling between Rome and Ravenna, his routine alternating between a private life replete with the trappings of almost limitless wealth, and state occasions. An emperor's job, as we have seen, was to embody the core ideologies of the Roman state. He was expected to encapsulate the superhuman, indeed God-ordained, nature of the Roman world order, displaying in his ceremonial self the divine support that had called the Roman Empire into being. As the star turn in the many ceremonies, processions, Christian masses and audiences, he could never let his halo slip. And what he had to officiate at, day in and day out, was supremely tedious in its repetitiveness. The Empire being the epitome of the one-party state in action, public disagreement was not tolerated. Unity was all. Ceremonies were relentlessly orchestrated to bring this point home. It was under Valentinian, it will be remembered, that the *Theodosian Code* was introduced to the Senate (see p. 124). Valentinian was spared this particular performance, but it was typical of what he had daily to endure. The acclamations that probably prefaced every major imperial ceremony involved 245 shouts of approval from the assembled senators. A brief experiment I have just run with my eleven-year-old son reveals that you can shout about eighteen such acclamations in a minute, so that the ceremony for the *Code* would have taken at least forty minutes – and that's not allowing for fatigue setting in and slowing things down towards the end.

Valentinian's predecessors had experienced the same daily grind, but they at least had the satisfaction of making policy decisions and appointments behind closed doors once the spectacles were over. We have already witnessed the frustration that such a lifestyle engendered in Valentinian's sister Honoria: an affair with her estate manager, an unwanted pregnancy and a dangerous liaison with Artilla the Hun (see Chapter 7). Nor was it easy for Valentinian to change things. Life is difficult for royal minors who reach adulthood only to find that they still remain marginal to the exercise of power. They may throw

caution to the winds, like the seventeen-year-old Edward III, who at midnight on 19 October 1330 broke into Nottingham castle to remove his mother Queen Isabella, arrest her lover Mortimer, and seize the reins of power. But most royal minors are not so daring, and in the 440s Aetius was the young emperor's only bulwark against the Huns.

If there was nothing that Valentinian could do about his frustrations in the 430s and 440s, the collapse of the Hunnic Empire brought a wind of change blowing through western court circles. By 450 or so, two bones of contention had arisen between Aetius and his emperor. On 28 July that year the eastern emperor Theodosius II had died after a fall from his horse. Valentinian was of the Theodosian dynasty, married to one of Theodosius' daughters, Eudoxia, and it was Theodosius' forces who had put him on the western throne in a determined restatement of the unity of that dynasty (see Chapter 6). Theodosius had been its last male representative in the east, his only son Arcadius having predeceased him. Hearing of his cousin's death, Valentinian had the idea, so we are told, of going to Constantinople to assert his claim to rule the entire Roman world as sole emperor. Aetius set himself against the plan. It was certainly ill conceived. Valentinian had no contacts in Constantinople, and eastern political circles were not about to welcome him. Matters there were ordered by Theodosius' sister Pulcheria, who had been a strong voice throughout her brother's reign. Eventually she married a staff officer by the name of Marcian. On 25 August it was Marcian who became the new emperor of the east. Valentinian had missed his chance, such as it was, and Aetius' opposition to his plan continued to rankle.

The second disagreement between the two concerned marriage alliances. Valentinian's union with Eudoxia, produced only two daughters: Eudocia (born in 438 or 439) and Placidia (born between 439 and 443). By the early 450s, after fifteen years of marriage, it was unlikely that the imperial couple would have any more children. This meant that the succession to the western Empire was up for grabs, and the likeliest route to securing it would be marriage to one or other of Valentinian's daughters. As we saw in Chapter 6, Eudocia had been betrothed to Huneric, son of Geiseric king of the Vandals, as part of the peace deal of the 440s, and he was not a serious contender for the throne. It was thus Placidia who became the key to the future of the Roman west, and Aetius worked hard in the early 450s to

persuade Valentinian to betroth her to his son Gaudentius. Such a marriage would have cemented Aetius in power, making it extremely likely that Gaudentius would succeed Valentinian. Given the lack of a male Theodosian heir, marriage into the dynasty would have been sufficient to confer legitimacy, especially as the same procedure had just been followed in Constantinople. Whether, in pushing for the marriage, Aetius was responding to a perception that the eastern succession issue had already weakened his hold over Valentinian, is unclear. But the proposal certainly increased the emperor's already festering resentment at the extent to which he was being marginalized within his own Empire.<sup>41</sup>

Moreover, with the death of Attila and the collapse of his Empire, Aetius now seemed much less critical to Valentinian's survival, and it was the emperor, not Aetius, after all, who embodied imperial continuity. For the first time since reaching adulthood, Valentinian could dare to contemplate life without his generalissimo. Aetius perhaps sensed the danger, which might be another reason why he risked adding the marriage issue to Valentinian's list of grievances. For all its emphasis on consensus, sharks always lurked in the deeper waters of Roman imperial politics; now, individuals in the emperor's entourage caught the first faint scent of blood. Of the plot that eventually brought Aetius down we are pretty well informed, thanks again to the labours of Constantine VII Porphyrogenitus. An account survives in another of his works: *Excerpts concerning Plots*. The fall of Aetius is preserved in a fragment from the history of a certain John of Antioch, but he was a late compiler and probably drew primarily on the history of Priscus. So it is again the Priscus-Constantine axis that tells us what we want to know.

There were two main conspirators. The first was a Roman senator of high birth named Petronius Maximus. He had begun his career before Aetius came to power, but was clearly considered an Aetian loyalist. Between 439 and 441 he held the important post of Praetorian Prefect of Italy, and was named consul for a second time in 443 – both appointments taking place during Aetius' pre-eminence.<sup>42</sup> The second was drawn from the A-list of likely suspects in any Roman palace plot: the eunuch head of the emperor's household Heraclius, the *primicerius sacri cubiculi* (Chief of the Sacred Bedroom). Armed with two issues with which to work on Valentinian, and aided by the fact that the Hunnic threat had receded, the plotters did their worst.<sup>43</sup>

As Aetius was explaining the finances and calculating the tax revenues, with a shout Valentinian suddenly leaped up from his throne and cried out that he would no longer be abused by such treacheries . . . While Aetius was stunned by this unexpected rage and was attempting to calm his irrational outburst, Valentinian drew his sword from his scabbard and, together with Heraclius, who was carrying a knife ready under his cloak . . . fell upon him.

Attacked simultaneously by emperor and eunuch, on 21 or 22 September 454 Aetius lay dead in the palace. His fall was followed by the usual round of bloodletting. Chief among the victims was Aetius' current Praetorian Prefect of Italy, a senator by the name of Boethius, grandfather of the famous philosopher.

Valentinian had waited until his thirties, but he had finally broken free. Unfortunately for him, he was not nearly as successful as the young Edward would be some 900 years later at rallying support afterwards. For one thing, the conspirators soon fell out among themselves:

After the murder of Aetius, Maximus paid court to Valentinian hoping that he would be made consul, and when he failed to achieve this, he wished to become Patrician. But Heraclius . . . acting from the same ambition and not wishing a counter-balance to his own power, thwarted Maximus' efforts by persuading Valentinian that, now he had freed himself from the oppression of Aetius, he should not transfer his power to others.

Old habits die hard, and even after Aetius' death Valentinian was not really in charge. The challenge was on to run him, especially as he had no male offspring, which meant that, in the longer term, the imperial succession remained an open race. Once it became clear that he was getting nowhere by persuasion, Maximus turned again to deadlier methods, this time suborning two guards officers, Optila and Thraustila, who had been close to Aetius. Priscus relates that, on 16 March 455:

Valentinian decided to go riding [in Rome] on the Campus Martius . . . When he dismounted from his horse and was walking off to practise archery, Optila and his followers . . . attacked him. Optila struck Valentinian across the side of the head and, when he turned to see who had struck him, felled him with a second

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blow to the face. Thraustila cut down Heraclius, and both of them took the emperor's diadem and horse and rode off to Maximus.

So perished Valentinian, less than six months after the murder of Aetius. This is the kind of political anarchy that always followed in this case more a regency, there was no ready-made regime-in-waiting. As usual, a coalition had been hastily constructed by individuals who had no intention of sharing power with one another afterwards. But if the pattern of Aetius' fall was nothing out of the ordinary, and the fact that it failed to generate an immediate successor hardly surprising, other features were highly particular. Fascinating in this respect is the obituary for Aetius, originally appearing in Priscus' history immediately after the murder:

Through his alliance with the barbarians, he had protected Placidia, Valentinian's mother, and her son while he was a child. When Boniface crossed from North Africa with a large army, he out-generalled him . . . Felix, who was his fellow general, he killed by cunning when he learned that he was preparing to destroy him at Placidia's suggestion. He crushed the [Visigoths] who were encroaching on Roman territory, and he brought to heel the [Bagaudae] . . . In short, he wielded enormous power, so that not only kings but neighbouring peoples came at his order.

As obituaries go, it's pretty succinct, and it captures the mix of plotting at court and campaigning in the field that was the reality of Aetius' political life. What is especially interesting is the mention in its opening words of Aetius' dependence on an alliance with 'barbarians'. Not just any barbarians, but one group in particular: the Huns. As the passage suggests, Aetius' career was founded upon his Hunnic alliance. It was the Huns who sustained him when he seemed about to lose civil wars – first in 425 as the usurpation of John unravelled, and again in 433 when Boniface defeated him at their first confrontation. And as we saw in Chapter 6, Hunnic troops played a central role in his restoration of order in Gaul in the 430s, particularly in his defeats of the Burgundians and Visigoths. Aetius' death was far more than one man's tragedy. It also marked the end of an era. The death of Attila and disappearance of the Hunnic Empire not only made it possible for

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Valentinian to contemplate life without Aetius, it also undermined the delicate balance of powers by which Aetius had kept the western Empire in business. Aetius without the Huns had been surplus to requirements. His successors needed to find a new mechanism for sustaining the west.

## Brave New World

THE KEY to understanding the new political order brought on by the extinction of Hunnic power is provided by virtually the first act of the short-lived regime of Petronius Maximus.

Having murdered Valentinian III on 16 March 455, he was proclaimed emperor the following day. His hands had barely grasped the imperial sceptre when he sent an ambassador to solicit the support of the powerful Visigoths, who had been settled in south-western France since 418. The man he chose was one of his newly appointed military commanders, perhaps commanding general in Gaul (*magister militum per Gallias*), Eparchius Avitus. Avitus was a Gallic aristocrat of impeccable fortune and education. Descended from high office-holders, he was related to a network of important families, and his estates centred on Clermont-Ferrand in the Auvergne. He had served with distinction under Aetius in the campaigns against the Norici and Burgundians in the 430s, then followed this up with a spell as supreme civilian administrator in Gaul – Praetorian Prefect – between 439 and 441. At that point he left office, possibly through natural rotation or because he fell out with Aetius, to return to prominence about a decade later. He then played a major role in negotiating the Visigothic assistance that helped Aetius repel Attila's assault on Gaul in 451.<sup>44</sup> In every way, therefore, Avitus was an excellent choice. Close to Aetius, but not too close, he had a good track record and connections with both the Gallic aristocracy and the Goths.

From Avitus himself, no writings have survived. As more than partial compensation, however, we have a collection of poetry and letters from his son-in-law, a certain Gaius Sollius Modestus Apollinaris Sidonius (who has already been cited in this book). The name is generally shortened for sanity's sake to Sidonius. As his marriage alliance with the family of Avitus might suggest, Sidonius derived from Gallic landowning stock of similar standing – its main estates were



situated around Lyon in the Rhône valley. His father had been Praetorian Prefect of Gaul himself about a decade after Avitus, holding the post in 448/9.<sup>45</sup> In the past, Sidonius' writings tended to get a rather bad press. At a time when any decent-thinking chap valued the standards of the classical Latin (first-century BC or AD) he was brought up on, the complexities and allusiveness of Sidonius' work could only aggravate, if not shock. Compared with the clarity and matter-of-factness of, say, Caesar, his love of showing off seemed the height of decadence. Writing at the end of the Victorian era, Sir Samuel Dill

[Sidonius] is essentially a literary man, of the stamp which this age of decadence [the fifth century] most admired. He is a stylist, not a thinker or inquirer. There is little doubt that he valued his own compositions not for their substance, but for those characteristics of style which we now think most worthless or even repulsive in them, the childish conceits, the meaningless antitheses, the torture applied to language so as to give an air of interest and distinction to the trivial commonplace of a colourless and monotonous existence...<sup>46</sup>

Even in translation, Sidonius can drive you crazy with his inability to call a spade a spade, and there's no doubt he spent a lot of time trying to say things in as complicated a way as possible. One of his later letters contains a nicely illuminating comment, delivered at a moment when he thought that the literary audience he had been educated to address had gone for ever: 'I am putting together the rest of my letters in more everyday language; it is not worth embellishing phrases which may never be published.'<sup>47</sup> But it is not fair to judge fifth-century style by first-century standards, and more recent commentators on late Roman Latin (not to mention late Roman Greek) have been less quick to condemn the stylistic complexities that were the height of artistic chic in the fourth and fifth centuries.<sup>48</sup> An age that can see chain-sawed cows in preservative as art is by definition unlikely to judge other artistic endeavours by rigid universal standards.

In any case, the issue of whether Sidonius wrote 'good' Latin or not is beside the point, since there is no doubting the historical importance of his oeuvre. The earliest of his extant writings date from the mid-450s, the latest to about 480, but the bulk fall into a twenty-year period after 455. He knew pretty much everyone who was anyone

in southern, especially south-eastern, Gaul, and the great and the good figure prominently in his letters, which, unlike those of Symmachus, don't hesitate to discuss matters of political substance when appropriate. His poems, or some of them, are equally important. Sidonius was significant enough to be involved in politics, and for emperors to court him for his support, but he was not important enough to have to face execution when their regime collapsed. Recognized as one of the leading stylists of his age, he served a succession of emperors who drew on his talents as a writer of panegyrics – keynote speeches – in their praise. We have met such texts before, and while they certainly don't tell the truth as you or I might recognize it, they have the huge virtue of giving us access to the world as particular regimes wished it to be portrayed. Sidonius, like Themistius and Merobaudes before him, was a propagandist.

From Sidonius' account it emerges without a shadow of doubt that Petronius Maximus sent Avitus to the Visigoths to solicit their support for his regime. Sidonius, of course, dressed this bald fact up a little. As he portrays it, the Visigoths, after hearing of the murder of Valentinian III, were preparing to launch a hostile takeover bid for the entire Roman west, when news of the approach of Avitus filled them with sudden panic.<sup>49</sup>

One of the Goths, who had reformed his pruning-hook and was shaping a sword with blows on the anvil and sharpening it with a stone, a man already prepared to rouse himself to fury at the sound of the trumpet and looking at any moment with manifold slaughter to bury the ground under unburied foes, cried out, as soon as the name of the approaching Avitus was clearly proclaimed: 'War is no more! Give me the plough again!'

You can see why those brought up on the tenets of classical Latin might find Sidonius' verbiage annoying, but the rhetoric is anything but pointless. It gives us a clear picture of his father-in-law as the one man able to dissuade the Visigoths from launching war. The same imaginary Goth goes on to declaim that, far from being mere onlookers, his people will now lend their military assistance to the new regime – and precisely because it is sponsored by Avitus: 'Nay, if I have gained a right knowledge of you [Avitus] in action before this, your auxiliary trooper will I be; thus at least I shall have permission to fight.' What strikes you here is the exaggerated presentation of Avitus'

importance. Earlier in the poem, likewise, when talking of Aetius' successes of the 430s, Sidonius excels himself: 'He [Aetius], glorious in arms as he was, did no deed without you [Avitus], although you did many without him.' Avitus no doubt performed useful service to him, but Aetius managed perfectly well without him in the 440s, when the latter slipped out of office. There can be no disputing that Aetius was the dominant partner.

But irritation at Sidonius' hyperbole must not distract us from the historical significance of Petronius Maximus' first move as emperor. Both Flavius Constantius and Aetius had strained every political sinew to prevent the Visigoths from increasing their influence within western imperial politics. Alaric and his brother-in-law Athaulf had both had visions, if fleeting, of the Goths as protectors of the western Empire. Alaric had offered Honorius a deal whereby he would become senior general at court, and his Goths be settled not far from Ravenna. Athaulf married Honorius' sister and named his son Theodosius. But Constantius and Aetius, those guardians of the western Empire, had resisted such pretensions; they had been willing to employ the Goths as junior allies against the Vandals, Alans and Suevi, but that was as far as it went. Aetius had preferred to pay and deploy Huns to keep the Goths within this very real political boundary rather than grant them a broader role in the business of Empire. Avitus' embassy, which, as Sidonius makes clear, sought from the Visigoths not just peaceful acquiescence but a military alliance, reversed at a stroke a policy that had kept the Empire afloat for forty years.

The immediate aftermath only reinforces the point. While Avitus was still with the Visigoths, the Vandals under the leadership of Geiseric launched a naval expedition from North Africa which brought their forces to the outskirts of Rome. In part, its aim was fun and profit, but it also had more substantial motives. As part of the diplomatic horse-trading that had followed the frustration of Aetius' attempts to reconquer North Africa, Huneric, eldest son of the Vandal king Geiseric, had been betrothed to Eudocia, daughter of Valentinian III. On seizing power, however, in an attempt to add extra credibility to his usurping regime, Petronius Maximus married Eudocia to his own son Palladius. The Vandal attack on Rome was also made, then, in outrage at being cheated, as Geiseric saw it, of this chance to play the great game of imperial politics. Hearing of the Vandals' arrival, Maximus

panicked, mounted a horse and fled. The imperial bodyguard and those free persons around him whom he particularly trusted deserted him, and those who saw him leaving abused him and reviled him for his cowardice. As he was about to leave the city, someone threw a rock, hitting him on the temple and killing him. The crowd fell upon his body, tore it to pieces and with shouts of triumph paraded the limbs about on a pole.<sup>50</sup>

So ended the reign of Petronius Maximus, on 31 May 455; he had been emperor for no more than two and a half months.

When the imperial capital was sacked for the second time, the damage sustained was more serious than in 410. Geiseric's Vandals looted and ransacked, taking much treasure and many prisoners back with them to Carthage, including the widow of Valentinian III, her two daughters, and Gaudentius, the surviving son of Aetius.<sup>51</sup> Upon hearing this news, Avitus immediately made his own bid for the throne, declaring himself emperor while still at the Visigothic court in Bordeaux. It was later, on 9 July that year, that his claim was ratified by a group of Gallic aristocrats at Arles, the regional capital. From Arles, not long afterwards, Avitus moved on triumphantly to Rome and began negotiations for recognition with Constantinople. The senior Roman army commanders in Italy – Majorian and Ricimer – were ready to accept him because they were afraid of the Visigothic military power at his disposal.<sup>52</sup>

A new order was thus born. Instead of western imperial regimes looking to keep the Visigoths and other immigrants at arm's length, the newcomers had established themselves as part of the western Empire's body politic. For the first time, a Visigothic king had played a key role in deciding the imperial succession.

The full significance of this revolution needs to be underlined. Without the Huns to keep the Goths and other immigrants into the Roman west in check, there was no choice but to embrace them. The western Empire's military reservoirs were no longer full enough for it to continue to exclude them from central politics. The ambition first shown by Alaric and Athaulf, and later by Geiseric in his desire to marry his son to an imperial princess, had come to fruition. Contemporaries were fully aware of the political turn-around represented by Avitus' elevation. Since time immemorial, the traditional education had portrayed barbarians – including Visigoths – as the 'other', the

irrational, the uneducated; the destructive force constantly threatening the Roman Empire. In a sense, with the Visigoths now having served for a generation as minor Roman allies in south-western France, the ground had been well prepared. Nonetheless, Avitus' regime was only too well aware that its Visigothic alliance was bound to be controversial. This is nowhere better demonstrated than in the writings of Sidonius, in particular in a letter penned by him from the court of the Visigothic king Theoderic II in the early months of Avitus' reign. Sidonius' letters are in no sense private documents. He wrote them in the expectation that their contents would be circulated. They were, in short, an excellent mechanism for disseminating a point of view among fellow Gallic landowners.<sup>33</sup>

Written to Avitus' son Agricola as a description of life at the Visigothic court, it opens with a portrait of Theoderic: 'In his build the will of God and Nature's plan have joined together to endow him with a supreme perfection; and his character is such that even the jealousy which hedges a sovereign has no power to rob it of its glories.' We then hear about the king's day. Having started with a prayer or two, he spends the morning receiving embassies and settling cases; then, in the afternoon, perhaps a little hunting, at which, as in all else, he excels. In the evening comes the main meal:

When one joins him at dinner . . . there is no unpolished conglomeration of discoloured old silver set by panting attendants on sagging tables; the weightiest thing on these occasions is the conversation. The viands attract by their skilful cookery, not by their costliness. Replenishment of goblets comes at such long intervals that there is more reason for the thirsty to complain than for the intoxicated to refrain. To sum up: you can find there Greek elegance, Gallic plenty, Italian briskness; the dignity of state, the attentiveness of a private home, the ordered discipline of royalty.<sup>34</sup>

The letter closes with a little joke at the king's expense. After dinner Theoderic liked to play a game of dice, and would show the proper spirit by protesting if he perceived that his rival was letting him win. On the other hand, should you want a favour done, Sidonius notes, the thing to do was to let the king win, but without his noticing what you were up to. This bit of patronizing aside, Sidonius' message could not be clearer. Theoderic II was not your run-of-the-mill barbarian.

driven by his senses, addicted to alcohol and the next adrenalin rush. He was, in fact, a 'Roman' in the proper sense, one who had learned reason and self-discipline, who ran his court, his life – indeed, himself – in the time-hallowed Roman manner. He was a man one could do business with. I have no idea what life was really like at the Visigothic court, but to justify Avitus' association with Theoderic, Theoderic had to be presented as possessing all the virtues, and Sidonius duly obliged. The revolution was gathering pace. Barbarians were being presented as Romans to justify the inescapable reality that, since they could no longer be excluded, they now had to be included in the construction of working political regimes in the west.

At first sight, this inclusion of the alien would not seem to be a mortal blow to the integrity of the Empire. Theoderic was Roman enough to be willing to play along; he saw the need to portray him as a good Roman in order to satisfy landowning opinion. There were, however, a couple of very big catches which made a Romano-Visigothic military alliance not quite the asset you might initially suppose. First, political support always came at a price. Theoderic was entirely happy to support Avitus' bid for power, but, not unreasonably, he expected something in return. In this instance, his desired reward was a free hand in Spain where, as we have seen, the Suevi had been running riot since Aetius' attention had been turned towards the Danube in the early 440s. Theoderic's request was granted, and he promptly sent a Visigothic army to Spain under the auspices of Avitus' regime, notionally to curb Suevic depredations. Hitherto, of course, when the Visigoths had been deployed in Spain, it was always in conjunction with Roman forces. This time, Theoderic was left to operate essentially on his own initiative, and we have a first-hand – Spanish – description of what happened. The Visigothic army defeated the Suevi, we are told, capturing and executing their king. They also took every opportunity, both during the assault and in the cleaning-up operations that followed, to gather as much booty as they could, sacking and pillaging, amongst others, the towns of Braga, Asturica and Palentia. Not only did the Goths destroy the kingdom of the Suevi, they also helped themselves uninhibitedly to the wealth of Spain.<sup>35</sup> Just like Attila, Theoderic had warriors to satisfy. His willingness to support Avitus was based on calculations of profits, and a lucrative Spanish spree was just the thing.

Second, the inclusion of barbarians into the political game of

regime-building in the Roman west meant that there were now many more groups manoeuvring for position around the imperial court. Before 450, any functioning western regime had to incorporate and broadly satisfy three army groups – two main ones in Italy and Gaul, and a lesser one in Illyricum – plus the landed aristocracies of Italy and Gaul, who occupied the key posts in the imperial bureaucracy. The desires of Constantinople also had to be accommodated. As in the case of Valentinian III, should western forces be divided between different candidates, eastern emperors disposed of enough clout and brute force to impose their own candidate. Though too far away to rule the west directly, Constantinople could exercise a virtual veto over the choices of the other interested parties. Incorporating this many interests could make arriving at a stable outcome a long-drawn-out business.

AFTER THE COLLAPSE of the Hunnic Empire, the Burgundians and Vandals were the next to start jockeying for position and clamouring for rewards. The Burgundians had been settled by Aetius around Lake Geneva in the mid-430s. Twenty years later, they took advantage of the new balance of power in the west to acquire a number of other Roman cities and the revenues they brought with them from their territories in the Rhône valley: Besançon, le Valais, Grenoble, Autun, Chalon-sur-Saône and Lyon.<sup>56</sup> The Vandal-Alan coalition's sack of Rome in 455, as we have seen, betrayed a desire to participate in imperial politics. On the death of Valentinian, Victor of Vita tells us,<sup>57</sup> Geiseric too, expanding his powerbase, seized control of Tripolitania, Numidia and Mauretania, together with Sicily, Corsica and the Balearics. Allowing just some of the barbarian powers to participate in the Empire massively complicated western politics; and the greater the number, the harder it was to find sufficient rewards to generate long-term coalition.

A strong sense of the underlying tensions that made the regime of Avitus essentially unstable emerges from the second of Sidonius' poems to survive from this period. On 1 January 456, when the emperor assumed the consulship in Rome, his ever loyal son-in-law was called upon to make a speech on his behalf. It began, not surprisingly, by establishing the emperor's overwhelming suitability for office. In doing so, Sidonius took the opportunity to make some pointed comparisons. In particular, he dismissed Valentinian III as a 'mad eunuch' (*semitur amens*), and contrasted his style of leadership with the military and

political skills that Avitus brought to the job. Turning to the key issue of Avitus' relationship with the king of the Visigoths, Sidonius handled this potentially explosive subject with subtlety, but his intent was clear enough. First, he argued with vigour that Avitus had never been one to cosy up to the Visigothic court. He had been there as a young man, as everyone knew, in the 420s, when '[the Visigothic king] desired exceedingly to have you [Avitus] as one of his own, but you scorned to act the friend rather than the Roman.'<sup>58</sup> Sidonius then focused on one small incident in the 430s when Avitus took a terrible revenge against a marauding Visigoth who had wounded one of his servants:

When first they approached, breast to breast and face to face, the one [Avitus] shook with anger, the other [the Goth] with fear . . . But when the first bout, the second, the third have been fought, see! The upraised spear comes and pierces the man of blood; his breast was transfixed and his corselet twice split, giving way even where it covered the back; and as the blood came throbbing through the two gaps the separate wounds took away the life that each of them might claim.

Translated into English (or even into Latin), Sidonius is saying that Avitus found the Visigothic bastard who'd hurt his man, and ran him so far through with his spear that it came out the other side. Translated into politico-speak, the message is that Avitus was no Visigoth-loving traitor but a true Roman who had given the barbarians as hard a kicking as even the fiercest hawk could desire.

All of this was addressed to the suspicions of Sidonius' audience of Italo-Roman senators and generals, as was, above all, his account of the new emperor's elevation. On hearing of the deaths of Aetius and Valentinian, the Visigoths had begun to plan their own wars of conquest.<sup>59</sup> Then into the Visigothic camp strode Avitus, and everything changed. By his presence alone he spread panic among them, and such was their fear of him that the Visigoths' immediate impulse was to try to please him by engaging in a military alliance. But whether Avitus should declare himself emperor was his decision alone. As for the Visigothic king, Sidonius has him say:

We do not force [the purple] on you, but we do beg you; with you as leader I am a friend of Rome, with you as emperor I am her soldier. You are not stealing the sovereignty from any man;

no Augustus holds the Latian hills, a palace without a master in yours . . . My part is only to serve you; but if Gaul should force you, as she has the right to do, the world would love your command for fear it would otherwise perish.

We see from this special pleading, and the allusion to the power vacuum in Italy, exactly where the audience's political sensitivities lay. To the Italians, the audience Sidonius was now addressing, Avitus might appear no more than a creature of the Visigoths after the pattern of Priscus Attalus under Alaric and Athaulf. The speech responded by insisting that Avitus was his own man. You only had to look at his long history of smacking the Visigoths around. He had also taken the purple, if unwillingly, because he was the only man who could command their obedience. In these straitened times, the barbarians' military power was necessary to the safety of the Empire, but Avitus remained a true Roman.

It was a good try. And so much for the claim that Sidonius lacked ideas. But the Italian audience, particularly the army men amongst them, were having none of it. The sources insist, as we have seen, that the Roman army of Italy only ever tolerated Avitus because he had the military backing of the Visigoths. When, in 456, the Visigoths became too deeply embroiled in Spain to intervene any further in Italy, the two main Roman commanders, Majorian and Ricimer, withdrew their allegiance. On 17 October that year they gave battle to the few forces Avitus could scrape together – presumably remnants of the Roman field army of Gaul – outside the city of Placentia in northern Italy. Avitus was beaten, forced to become the city's bishop, and died shortly afterwards in mysterious circumstances.<sup>60</sup>

We see here, then, in a nutshell the problem now facing the west. Avitus had the support of the Visigoths, the support of at least some Gallic senators, and of some of the Roman army of Gaul. But faced with the hostility of the Italian senators, and especially of the commanders of the Italian field army, the coalition didn't stand a chance. By the early 460s, the extent of the crisis in the west generated by the collapse of Attila's Empire was clear. There were too many interested parties and not enough rewards to go round. Constantinople, however, had decided on one last throw of the dice.

## END OF EMPIRE

SOME HISTORIANS HAVE CRITICIZED Constantinople for not doing more in the fifth century to save the embattled west. From the *Notitia Dignitatum* (see p. 246) we know that the east's armies recovered from Hadrianople to comprise, by the end of the fourth century, a field army of 131 regiments distributed between four regional commands: one on the Persian front, one in Thrace, and two central, 'praesental' armies (from the Latin for 'stationed in the imperial presence'). Its mobile forces, therefore, mustered between 65,000 and 100,000 men.<sup>1</sup> Also, the east disposed of numerous units of frontier garrison troops (*limitanei*). The archaeological field surveys of the last twenty years have confirmed, furthermore, that the fourth-century agricultural prosperity of the east's key provinces – Asia Minor, the Middle East and Egypt – showed no sign of slackening during the fifth. Some believe that the eastern Empire thus had the wherewithal to intervene effectively in the west, but chose not to. In the most radical statement of the case, it has been argued that Constantinople was happy to see barbarians settle on western territory for the disabling effect this had on the west's military establishment because it removed any possibility of an ambitious western pretender seeking to unseat his eastern counterpart and unite the Empire. This had happened periodically in the fourth century, when the emperors Constantine and Julian took over the entire Empire from an originally western power-base.<sup>2</sup> But in fact, bearing in mind the problems it had to deal with on its own frontiers, Constantinople's record for supplying aid to the west in the fifth century is perfectly respectable.

### Constantinople and the West

THE EASTERN Empire's military establishment was very substantial, but large numbers of troops had always to be committed to the two



key sectors of its eastern frontier in Armenia and Mesopotamia, where Rome confronted Persia. If you asked any fourth-century Roman where the main threat to imperial security lay, the answer would have been Persia under its new Sasanian rulers. And from the third century, when the Sasanian revolution worked its magic, Persia was indeed the second great superpower of the ancient world. As we saw earlier, the new military threat posed by the Sasanians plunged the Roman Empire into a military and fiscal crisis that lasted the best part of fifty years. By the time of Diocletian in the 280s, the Empire had mobilized the necessary funding and manpower, but the process of adjustment to the undisputed power of its eastern neighbour was long and painful. The rise of Persia also made it more or less unavoidable to have one emperor constantly in the east, and hence made power-sharing a feature of the imperial office in the late Roman period. As a result of these transformations, Rome began to hold its own again, and there were no fourth-century repeats of such third-century disasters as the Persian sack of Antioch.

When assessing the military contribution of the eastern Empire to the west in the fifth century, it is important to appreciate that, while broadly contained from about 300, the new Persian threat never disappeared. Even if there was less fighting – and what fighting there was largely confined itself to a wearying round of sieges and limited gains – the Sasanians maintained a constant presence in the strategic thinking of east Roman politicians and generals. Faced with the defeat of Julian's Persian expedition in 363, then the longer-term effects of the Hun-inspired mayhem on the Danube in the mid-370s, successive Roman emperors had been forced on two occasions to grant Sasanian rulers peace treaties they would normally only have dreamt about. Following Julian's defeat, the emperor Jovian made humiliating concessions of territory and bases in Mesopotamia. Valens made some preliminary noises, even moves, towards their recovery, but after his death at Hadrianople Theodosius not only confirmed Roman acceptance of these losses, but also did a deal over Armenia, the other great bone of contention – and again, massively in Persia's favour (map 3).<sup>1</sup>

These concessions ushered in a relatively peaceful phase in Roman-Persian relations, as Sasanian aspirations were, for the moment, largely satisfied. Anyway, Persia was facing nomad-inspired troubles of its own in two northern frontier sectors: to the east in Transoxania (modern Uzbekistan), and in the Caucasus, in which Constantinople, too, had

an interest. Routes through the Caucasus led into Roman territory, if one turned right, and into Persian territory, if one carried straight on. The Huns had done both. The great Hunnic raid of 395 wreaked havoc not only in Rome's provinces south of the Black Sea but also over a surprisingly large area of the Persian Empire. So, in this new era of compromise when both Empires had Huns on their minds, they came to an unprecedented agreement for mutual defence. The Persians would fortify and garrison the key Darial Pass through the Caucasus, and the Romans would help defray the costs. So tranquil were Roman-Persian relations at this time, in fact, that the myth arose that the Persian Shah had adopted Theodosius II, at the request of his late father the emperor Arcadius, so as to smooth the boy's accession to the throne (he was only six when his father died).

None of this meant, however, that Constantinople could afford to lower its guard. Troop numbers were perhaps reduced in the fifth century, and less was spent on fortifications, but major forces still had to be kept on the eastern frontier. The *Notitia Dignitatum* – whose eastern sections date from about 395, after the Armenian accord – lists a field army of thirty-one regiments, roughly one-quarter of the whole, based in the east, together with 156 units of frontier garrison troops stationed in Armenia and the provinces comprising the Mesopotamian front, out of a total of 305 such units for the entire eastern Empire. And this in an era of relative stability. There were occasional quarrels with Persia, which sometimes came to blows, as in 421 and 441. The only reason the Persians didn't capitalize more on Constantinople's run-in with the Huns in the 440s seems to have been their own nomad problems.<sup>4</sup>

Just as, for Rome, Persia was the great enemy, so Rome was for Persia, and each particularly prized victories over the other. As we noted earlier, the provinces from Egypt to western Asia Minor were the eastern Empire's main source of revenue, and no emperor could afford to take chances with the region's security. As a result, Constantinople had to keep upwards of 40 per cent of its military committed to the Persian frontier, and another 92 units of garrison troops for the defence of Egypt and Libya. The only forces the eastern authorities could even think of using in the west were the one-sixth of its garrison troops stationed in the Balkans and the three-quarters of its field forces mustered in the Thracian and the two praesental armies.<sup>5</sup>

Up until 450, Constantinople's capacity to help the west was also

deeply affected by the fact that it bore the brunt of Hunnic hostility. As early as 408 (see p. 196), Uldin had briefly seized the east Roman fortress of Castra Martis in Dacia Ripensis, and by 413 the eastern authorities felt threatened enough to initiate a programme for upgrading their riverine defences on the Danube<sup>6</sup> and to construct the triple landwalls around Constantinople (see p. 203). Then, just a few years later, eastern forces engaged directly in attempts to limit the growth of Hunnic power. Probably in 421, they mounted a major expedition into Pannonia which was already, if temporarily, in Hunnic hands. They extracted a large group of Goths from the Huns' control and resettled them in east Roman territory, in Thrace. The next two decades were spent combating the ambitions of Attila and his uncle, and even after Attila's death it again fell to the east Roman authorities to clean up most of the fall-out from the wreck of the Hunnic Empire. As we saw in Chapter 8, it was the eastern Empire that the remaining sons of Attila chose to invade in the later 460s. Slightly earlier in the decade, east Roman forces had also been in action against armed fragments of Attila's disintegrating war machine, led by Hormidac and Bigelis. In 460, likewise, the Amal-led Goths in Pannonia had invaded the eastern Empire to extract their 300 pounds of gold (see p. 368).<sup>7</sup>

Judged against this strategic background, where military commitments could not be reduced on the Persian front, and where, thanks to the Huns, the Danube frontier required a greater share of resources than ever before, Constantinople's record in providing assistance to the west in the fifth century looks perfectly respectable. Although in the throes of fending off Uldin, Constantinople had sent troops to Honorius in 410, when Alaric had taken Rome and was threatening North Africa. Six units in all, numbering 4,000 men, arrived at a critical moment, putting new fight into Honorius when flight, or sharing power with usurpers, was on the cards. The force was enough to secure Ravenna, whose garrison was becoming mutinous, and bought enough time for the emperor to be rescued.<sup>8</sup> In 425, likewise, Constantinople had committed its praesental troops in large numbers to the task of establishing Valentinian III on the throne, and in the 430s Aspar the general had done enough in North Africa to prompt Geiseric to negotiate the first treaty, of 435, which denied him the conquest of Carthage and the richest provinces of the region. In 440/1, again, the east had committed so many of its Danubian and praesental troops to the projected east-west expedition to Africa, that the bureaucrat who

organized it received a mention in despatches and Attila and Bleda were handed an unmissable opportunity to unleash their armies on to Roman soil.

Although, as we saw in Chapter 7, Attila granted the eastern Empire an extraordinarily generous treaty in 450, the east did not even then balk at its duty to fellow Romans. Troops – we are not told how many – were sent to Aetius to assist him in harassing the Hunnic armies sweeping through northern Italy in 452, while other eastern forces achieved considerable success in attacking Hunnic homelands.<sup>9</sup> This is not the record of an eastern state that had no interest in sustaining the west. Nor is there the slightest sign that Constantinople had willed the barbarians to settle on western soil so as to weaken the power of the western emperors – not even, as used to be thought, to the extent of encouraging Alaric to transfer his Goths from the Balkans to Italy in 408. As Edward Thompson noted, choosing to fight and take what reprisals might come their way in 451/2, rather than grabbing Attila's generous peace and running, was a sign of real commitment on the part of Constantinople.<sup>10</sup>

Of course, in Constantinople emperors and – in particular – imperial advisers came and went, and policies towards the west varied. As mentioned earlier, up to the death of Theodosius II in July 450, commitment to the west derived partly from the fact that eastern and western emperors belonged to the same Theodosian house. In sustaining his cousin Valentinian, therefore, Theodosius was also stressing his own family's credentials for rule. And the largest single eastern expeditionary force of the period was sent west in 425 for a Roman civil war to put Valentinian III on the throne. But the catalogue of eastern assistance to the west cannot be reduced to mere dynastic self-interest. Help continued to be given after Theodosius' death, not least when Attila was attacking Italy in 452. Equally important, this aid list is compiled from a miscellany of sources and is unlikely to be exhaustive. In particular, I suspect that regular financial assistance was sent west during these years, in addition to the periodic offerings of military manpower. Thus, the decision of the authorities in Constantinople to mount a major rescue bid on the west's behalf in the 460s was no sudden aberration from the norm.

## Regime Change, Anthemius and North Africa

THE MOST OBVIOUS problem facing the Roman west round about 460 was a crisis of succession; since the death of Attila in 453 there had been little continuity. Valentinian III had been cut down by Aetius' bodyguards, egged on by Petronius Maximus, who seized the throne but in no time at all was himself killed by the Roman mob. Soon afterwards, Avitus had appointed himself emperor in collusion with the Visigoths and elements of the Gallo-Roman landowning and military establishments. Then came his ousting in 456 by Ricimer and Majorian, commanders of the Italian field forces. This army was to be the single most powerful military-cum-political force in the Roman west, and the two commanders would play a central kingmaking role.

Of the two, Ricimer is a particularly fascinating character. His grandfather was the Visigothic king Vallia who had negotiated with Flavius Constantius in 416, and on his mother's side he was descended from a princess of the Suevi. His sister married into the Burgundian royal house. Thus, in his family connections Ricimer reflects the revolutions that had recently brought so many autonomous groups of outsiders on to Roman soil. His career, however, was purely Roman and purely military, first reaching prominence under Aetius. Some have sought anti-Roman, pro-barbarian leanings in his policies, but none is apparent. Like Aetius and Stilicho, he was ready, when necessary, to make alliances with the new barbarian powers established in the west, but there is no sign that his genetic inheritance predisposed him to favour them at the expense of the central Roman authorities - in fact, quite the opposite. He was very much the heir of Stilicho: a well-connected barbarian proud to follow a Roman career, and who showed impeccable loyalty to the imperial ideal. Majorian too had served under Aetius, but, unlike Ricimer, was of a solidly Roman military family. His paternal grandfather had been a senior general in the 370s, and his father an important bureaucrat under Aetius; Majorian himself had eventually fallen out with Aetius, but Valentinian III recalled him after the generalissimo's murder.<sup>11</sup>

Hostility to Avitus made allies out of Ricimer and Majorian but, having removed him, they weren't quite sure what to do next. The result was an interregnum of several months. Eventually, the two

decided to make Majorian emperor, and his installation was celebrated on 1 April 457. Despite some initial successes, the new regime failed to find a definitive solution to the west's problems, and Ricimer and Majorian eventually quarrelled. On 2 August 461 Ricimer had his former partner in crime deposed, and executed five days later. He then turned to an elderly senator called Libius Severus to act as his new front man. On 19 November after another interregnum, Severus was raised to the purple. However, he was not well received elsewhere in the west. In particular, the commanders of what remained of the Gallic and Illyrian field armies, Aegidius and Marcellinus, were disgruntled enough to rebel.

The death of Valentinian III thus unleashed one of those bouts of protracted instability that were inherent to the Roman political system. Faced with nothing less than anarchy, Constantinople did what it could to promote stability. In the case of Avitus, the eastern emperor Marcian had refused to grant recognition, but negotiations with Constantinople over the accession of Majorian were eventually successful. After his initial installation, he was proclaimed emperor a second time on 28 December 457, quite probably on the receipt of recognition granted by Marcian's successor Leo I. That Majorian's regime had been recognized reflected the fact that it was much more broadly supported than that of Avitus. The same was not true, however, of Libius Severus - this time Leo would not play ball, and Severus remained resolutely unrecognized in Constantinople for the rest of his life.

As western regimes came and went, then, eastern emperors tried, it seems, to identify and support those with some real hope of generating stability. It was to preserve his position in Italy that Ricimer had appointed the harmless Severus. But as Aetius had shown, political longevity was inseparable from military success, and Ricimer also needed to defend Italy effectively, as well as the rest of the Roman west. For both of these objectives recognition and assistance from Constantinople were vital. Once it became clear that Severus was unacceptable to Leo - not least because of the opposition he had triggered in Aegidius and Marcellinus - he became an obstacle to Ricimer's policies. Severus eventually died at a suspiciously convenient moment, in November 465. One early sixth-century source suggests that he was poisoned, while Sidonius goes out of his way to stress that he had died by natural causes. The comment stands out so starkly in the middle of a passage devoted to other matters that it really does

look like a case of protesting too much. Whatever the truth of the matter, with Severus dead, negotiations could begin again.<sup>12</sup>

But granting or withholding recognition did nothing to address the second and much more fundamental problem facing the Roman west. As we saw in Chapter 8, the disappearance of the Huns as an effective force left western imperial regimes with no choice but to buy support from at least some of the immigrant powers now established on its soil. Avitus won over the Visigoths by offering them a free hand – to their great profit, as it turned out – in Spain. Majorian had been forced to recognize the Burgundians' desire to expand, and had allowed them to take over some more new cities (*civitates*) in the Rhône valley; and he continued to allow the Visigoths to do pretty much as they wanted in Spain. To buy support for Libius Severus, similarly, Ricimer had handed over to the Visigoths the major Roman city of Narbonne with all its revenues.<sup>13</sup> But now, there were simply too many players in the field, and this, combined with rapid regime change, had created a situation in which even the already much reduced western tax revenues were being further expended in a desperate struggle for stability. Three things needed to happen in the west to prevent its annihilation. Legitimate authority had to be restored; the number of players needing to be conciliated by any incoming regime had to be reduced; and the Empire's revenues had to rise. Analysts in the eastern Empire came to precisely this conclusion, and in the mid-460s hatched a plan that had a very real chance of putting new life back into the ailing west.

THE DEATH OF Severus opened the path to renewed negotiations between Ricimer and Constantinople. They were long and tortuous. No source gives us details, but there was a seventeen-month interregnum – the longest yet – before the next western emperor was proclaimed, on 12 April 467. This gap, as much as the new emperor's identity, alerts us to the crooked diplomatic paths that must have been trodden in the interim. The choice fell on Anthemius, an eastern general of proven abilities and high pedigree, and the nominee of the eastern emperor Leo (although Ricimer certainly accepted the appointment). Anthemius' maternal grandfather – also called Anthemius – had been virtual ruler of the eastern Empire for the decade 405–14, acting as Praetorian Prefect in the east during the last years of the reign of the emperor Arcadius and the early years of his son Theodosius II. The new emperor's father, Procopius, was nearly as distinguished

Descended from the usurper Procopius of the mid-360s, and hence distantly related to the house of Constantine, he had risen to supreme command of Roman forces on the Persian front (*magister militum per Orientem*) in the mid-420s. The younger Anthemius followed his father into the army, where he gained distinction, emerging in the mid-450s to play a leading role in containing the fall-out from the Hunnic Empire after Attila's death.<sup>14</sup> Immediately afterwards, he was named consul for 455, and Patrician, and promoted to commanding general of one of the central field armies (*magister militum praesentalis*). He also received the hand in marriage of the emperor Marcian's only daughter, Aelia Marcia Euphemia. Sidonius says that on Marcian's death back in 457 Anthemius had nearly become emperor, and for once this doesn't look like an exaggeration. The marriage suggests that Anthemius was Marcian's preferred successor. But the purple didn't come to him. Sidonius says that his own reluctance held him back (but that's another common trope of panegyric). Instead, Leo was promoted – he was a guards officer through whom the other *magister militum praesentalis*, Aspar, was looking to run the Empire. Anthemius cannot, however, have been too disaffected, because he continued to serve the new emperor as general.<sup>15</sup>

In short, Anthemius' imperial credentials were impeccable, and so equally applicable to the post of eastern emperor that Leo and Aspar may well have been scanning the 'Italian situations vacant' column in the *Constantinopolitan Times* for quite a while before Severus' convenient demise. Even if happy to be rid of him, it did not detract from the level of support they were willing to offer him. In the spring of 467 Anthemius arrived in Italy with a military force provided by the commanding general of Roman field forces in Illyricum (*magister militum per Illyricum*), Marcellinus.<sup>16</sup> Marcellinus was originally Aetius' appointee and had taken control of the area on his assassination. The emperor Majorian had reconfirmed his appointment, but after Majorian's death he applied to Constantinople rather than to Libius Severus, for authorization to continue in his post. It was through the eastern emperor Leo, therefore, that Marcellinus' support for Anthemius was channelled. Leo also secured Ricimer's consent to Anthemius' promotion, and the relationship was sealed by a marriage alliance: as soon as Anthemius arrived in Italy, his only daughter Alypia married Ricimer. Combining talent and pedigree with backing from both the west in the person of Ricimer, and Constantinople, Anthemius

was the man to restore political stability, if anyone could, to the Roman west.

Anthemius went to Italy with a plan for dealing with the more fundamental problems facing his new Empire. First, he quickly restored a modicum of order north of the Alps in Gaul. It is difficult to estimate how much of Gaul was still functioning as part of the western Empire in 467. In the south the Visigoths, and certainly the Burgundians, accepted Anthemius' rule; both of their territories remained legally part of the Empire. We know that institutions like the *cursus publicus* were still functioning here. Further north, things are less clear. The Roman army of the Rhine, or what was left of it, had gone into revolt on the deposition of Majorian, and part of it still formed the core of a semi-independent command west of Paris. Refugees from battle-torn Roman Britain also seem to have contributed to the rise of a new power in Brittany, and for the first time Frankish warbands were flexing their muscles on Roman soil. In the fourth century, Franks had played the same kind of role on the northern Rhine frontier as the Alamanni played to their south. Semi-subdued clients, they both raided and traded with the Roman Empire, and contributed substantially to its military manpower; several leading recruits, such as Bauto and Arbogast, rose to senior Roman commands. Also like the Alamanni, the Franks were a coalition of smaller groups, each with their own leadership. By the 460s, as Roman control collapsed in the north, some of these warband leaders began for the first time to operate exclusively on the Roman side of the frontier, selling their services, it seems, to the highest bidder.<sup>17</sup>

None of these Gallic powers was strong enough directly to threaten what remained of the Roman west when it was buoyed up with eastern support, and Anthemius' arrival cowed all of them at least into acquiescence. Gaul, however, wasn't the fundamental problem. Even Majorian had done nearly as well there as Anthemius in attracting acceptance, even support, from the Gallo-Roman landowners. The Gallic Sidonius, for instance, had played a role in the Burgundians' seizure of Lyon, and for this Majorian initially punished him with a higher tax bill. In response, Sidonius wrote the emperor a poem, complaining in mannered and deliberately self-deprecating fashion: 'For now my talkative muse is silenced by the tax, and culls instead of Vergil's and Terence's lines the pence and halfpence owed to the Exchequer.'<sup>18</sup> So Majorian let him off and, along with many of his

peers, Sidonius joined the ranks of the emperor's Gallic supporters. A letter of this era recalls a convivial evening when the emperor dined and swapped witticisms with Sidonius and his friends.<sup>19</sup> The arrival in their midst of the engaging Anthemius led to queues of Gallo-Roman landowners anxious to court and be courted by the new emperor. We know that the *cursus publicus* was still working because Sidonius used it on his way to see Anthemius at the head of a Gallic deputation. Anthemius responded in kind. Sidonius wormed his way into the good graces of the two most important Italian senatorial power-brokers of the time, Gennadius Avienus and Flavius Caecina Decius Basilius, and with their help got the chance to deliver a panegyric to the emperor, on 1 January 468.<sup>20</sup> As a result, he was appointed by Anthemius to the high office of Urban Prefect of Rome.

A time-honoured process was in operation: with self-advancement in mind, likely-looking landowners would turn up at the imperial court at the start of a new reign to offer support and receive gifts in return.<sup>21</sup> But fiddling with the balance of power in Gaul wasn't going to contribute anything much towards a restoration of the western Empire.

There was only one plan that stood any real chance of putting life back into the Roman west: reconquering North Africa. The Vandal-Alan coalition had never been accepted into the country club of allied immigrant powers that began to emerge in the mid-fifth century. The treaty of 442, which recognized its seizure of Carthage, was granted when Aetius was at the nadir of his fortunes; it was an exception to the Vandals' usual relationship with the Roman state, which was one of great hostility. The western Empire, as we have seen, from the 410s onwards had consistently allied with the Visigoths against the Vandals and Alans, and the latter's history after 450 was one of similar exclusion. Unlike the Visigoths or the Burgundians, the Vandals and Alans did not contribute to Aetius' military coalition that fought against Attila in Gaul in 451; nor were they subsequently courted or rewarded by the regimes of Avitus, Majorian or Libius Severus. Their leader Geiseric was certainly after membership of the club, as his sack of Rome at the time of Petronius Maximus paradoxically showed. This was partly motivated by the fact that Maximus had upset the marriage arrangements between his son Huneric and the elder daughter of Valentinian III. After they sacked Rome in 455, the Vandals continued to raid the coast of Sicily and various Mediterranean islands. This was an enterprise undertaken in large measure for profit, but Geiseric also



had a more ambitious, political, agenda. Part of his booty from the sack of Rome had been Valentinian III's women: his wife Licinia Eudoxia, and his daughters Eudocia and Placidia. Eudocia was duly married to Geiseric's eldest son Huneric. Probably in 462, Eudocia and Placidia were freed to go to Constantinople, where Placidia married a Roman senator called Anicius Olybrius, who had fled to the eastern capital to escape the sack. After 462, Geiseric was canvassing for Anicius Olybrius as heir to the western throne. From the Vandal point of view, this would have had the desirable outcome that the next western emperor would have the next king of the Vandals for a brother-in-law: another route to the political acceptance that Geiseric so obviously craved.<sup>22</sup>

The history that had brought the Vandals to North Africa was only marginally less respectable, from a Roman point of view, than that which had seen Visigoths and Burgundians installed in Gaul. All three had forced treaties out of the Roman state by military action, or the threat of it; given the choice, the west Roman imperial authorities would rather have had nothing to do with any of them. The real problem undermining Geiseric's bid to be admitted to the immigrant powers' club was not so much past indiscretions per se, but the fact that, while in flagrante, he had come into possession of the richest, most productive provinces of the western Empire. Since the 440s, in addition to the lands he already held in North Africa, he had seized Tripolitania and a number of Mediterranean islands. His annual raids were spreading fear and disorder up and down the Italian coastlines. Destroying the Vandals would therefore achieve two highly desirable ends in one fell swoop. It would take out one of the three major barbarian powers established on western soil, and, more important, return an invaluable reservoir of wealth to the imperial treasury.

It is worth indulging here in a little counterfactual history. The knock-on effects of a decisive victory over Geiseric, itself far from inconceivable,<sup>23</sup> would have been far-reaching. With Italy and North Africa united, Spain could have been added to the new western power-base. Unlike the Vandal-Alan coalition, the Suevi who had stayed in Spain were no more than a relatively minor irritant. Their power ebbed and flowed according to the amount of Roman resources devoted to the peninsula at any one time, and there is no reason to think that they would have been able to hold out against a full-scale imperial counterattack. Then, once Hispanic revenues had begun to

flow in again, much reconstruction would in turn have become possible in Gaul. At the very least, Visigoths and Burgundians could have been reduced to much smaller enclaves of influence, stripped of some of their more recent acquisitions such as Narbonne and the cities of the Rhône valley. The assertive Bagaudae of the north could likewise have been brought back into line.

Such a reborn west would still have looked more like a coalition, with substantially autonomous Gothic and Burgundian spheres of influence coexisting alongside the territories under direct Roman rule, than a single integrated state like the old fourth-century Empire. But the Roman centre would have become once again the dominant partner, with the strategic situation restored at least to a level comparable with that of the 410s, before the loss of North Africa – better, even, since there would be no Vandal-Alan coalition loose in Spain. Move on another twenty years, and even the Romano-Brits, struggling against the Saxon invaders, might have benefited. This is, of course, a best-case scenario. The Visigoths had proved impossible to destroy even during the eras of Theodosius I and Alaric when the Empire had disposed of much greater assets, so they were a problem that was unlikely to go away. Nonetheless, there were plenty of Rome-focused landowners still around in Gaul and Spain in the late 460s, as Sidonius' dash to Italy to seek out Anthemius shows, who would have welcomed the resurgence of a plausible western Empire. And, however you look at it, a reborn west based on the possession of Italy, North Africa, most of Spain and large chunks of Gaul was a formidable prospect. Even as late as the 460s, all was not lost: a successful campaign against the Vandals could have halted the vicious circle of decline and guaranteed the western Empire an active political life for the foreseeable future.

That eliminating the Vandals was the best available answer to the problems of the west had been appreciated for some time. The only other western regime to have shown much fight after the assassination of Aetius was that of Majorian, and he had adopted the same strategy. From early in his reign, we have a verse panegyric Sidonius gave in the emperor's honour during a stay at Lyon in 458. After the usual expression of superlatives designed to demonstrate that Majorian has been blessed with all the qualities of the perfect emperor, the scene then shifts to Rome, personified as an armed goddess surveying her territories. All is well, until:<sup>24</sup>

Of a sudden Africa flung herself down weeping, with her swarthy cheeks all torn. Bowing her forehead she broke the corn-ears that crowned her, ears whose fruitfulness was now her bane; and thus she began: I come, a third part of the world, unfortunate because one man is fortunate. This man [Geiseric], son of a slave-woman, hath long been a robber; he hath blotted out our rightful lords, and for many a day hath wielded his barbarian sceptre in my land, and having driven our nobility utterly away this stranger loves nothing that is not mad.

This opens a long appeal for Rome to awaken from her slumbers and right Africa's wrongs, into which Sidonius interweaves an account of Majorian's martial past, again so as to parade his credentials as the right man for the job. The goddess's speech comes to a close with a startling image of Geiseric:

he is sunk in indolence and, thanks to untold gold, no longer knows aught of steel. His cheeks are bloodless; a drunkard's heaviness afflicts him, pallid flabbiness possesses him, and his stomach, loaded with continual gluttony, cannot rid itself of the sour wind.

Nothing like a little fart joke to lighten the mood, even at an imperial celebration. But Sidonius also had a more serious point. The time was ripe for Majorian to avenge Africa 'so that Carthage may cease to war against Italy'.

This was a direct statement of intent. No imperial panegyrist was ever allowed to stand before an emperor and tell him to do some specific thing, unless that emperor already had every intention of so doing.<sup>25</sup> Sidonius had clearly been told that one of the aims of his panegyric was to prepare landowning opinion for an assault on the Vandals. This was early in the year 458. There was still much to do in preparation, as Sidonius makes clear. For a start, more order had to be restored in Gaul before they could concentrate on the North African adventure; and fleets had to be constructed.<sup>26</sup> But from its earliest days Majorian's regime committed itself to an assault on the Vandals.

In 461, it was ready to deliver. Majorian's plan was, with his main force, to follow the route taken by the Vandals themselves. By the spring, 300 ships were gathered in harbours along the coast of the Hispanic province of Carthaginiensis, from Cartago Nova (Cartagena) to Illici (Elche) about a hundred kilometres further north. Majorian

and his army duly arrived in Spain, from there to be transported, it seems, to Mauretania, with a view to marching in full battle order into the heartland of Vandal Africa.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, Marcellinus led elements of his Illyrican field army into battle in Sicily, expelling the Vandals from footholds they had established on the island. Securing Sicily was an end in itself, but may also have been designed to sow doubt in Geiseric's mind about the trajectory of the main attack. Feeling cornered, Geiseric made peace overtures, but Majorian was confident enough to reject them. More to the point, the emperor had staked too much in the expedition to contemplate compromise. But, informed of Majorian's plans, Geiseric struck first: his fleet raided the Spanish coast and destroyed Majorian's shipping. The emperor's army was left cooling its heels on the Spanish beaches; the campaign, heralded as the centrepiece of Majorian's policy as early as 458, had failed.

Majorian had lost his hold on power. He left Spain in high summer, travelling back overland to Italy. En route, he was arrested and deposed by Ricimer on 2 August, and executed five days later. For Majorian, the African gamble ended in disaster, but the reasoning behind it was sound. When Anthemius came west a few years later, it can have been no surprise to anyone that his eyes were fixed firmly on Carthage.

### The Byzantine Armada

If LEO WAS happy enough to remove so formidable a presence as Anthemius from Constantinople, the eastern emperor's contribution to his attempt to reconquer Vandal Africa was unstinting. This may well have been part of the deal between them. A number of sources give us a fair idea of the costs involved. The most detailed account is found in fragments from a work by another Constantinople-based historian. Penned by a certain Candidus in the late fifth century, the fragments are preserved in an encyclopaedic Byzantine work, the *Suda*, of the late tenth. Here we learn: 'The official in charge of [financial] matters revealed that 47,000 pounds of gold came through the Prefects, and through the Count of the Treasuries an additional 17,000 pounds of gold and 700,000 pounds of silver, as well as monies raised through confiscations and from the Emperor Anthemius.'<sup>28</sup> One pound of gold equated to more or less eighteen of silver, giving a total of about

103,000 pounds of gold, and it was called in from every available source: from general taxation (the purview of the Prefects), from the exploitation of imperial estates (that of the Count of the Treasuries), as well as confiscations and anything else that Anthemius could extract from the west. Of other sources, one gives more or less the same figure as Candidus, while two others put it higher: at 120,000 and 130,000 pounds of gold. The figures are roughly similar (Candidus' total does not include the monies he refers to as having been raised by Anthemius himself, from the west). The general level of magnitude is also perfectly plausible. The construction of Justinian's Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople in the 530s, for instance, cost the eastern Roman treasury 15–20,000 pounds of gold. The emperor Anastasius (reigned 491–517), whose financial prudence was legendary and whose reign had been blessed with relative peace, left, on his death, 320,000 pounds of gold for his successor. A hundred and three thousand pounds is forty-six tons: a huge figure, then, but plausible enough, and a good guide to Leo's commitment to the west.<sup>29</sup>

The military effort generated by all this cash was correspondingly massive. An armada of eleven hundred ships, nearly four times the size of the fleet assembled by Majorian, was assembled from across the eastern Empire. Again, the figure is plausible. If the much damaged western Empire could find 300 in 461,<sup>30</sup> 1,100 for such an ambitious project is entirely proportionate. No one gives tonnages for the 468 expedition, but the ships of an east Roman fleet of 532 varied between 20 and 330 tons. Most of the vessels were tiny by modern standards. The vast majority were merchant ships powered by sails alone, but there may have been some specialist warships, *dromons*, that would proceed as far as the action under sail, then join battle under oar power.<sup>31</sup> The military manpower committed was similarly to scale. Procopius puts the figure at 100,000, but that seems both high and suspiciously round. The later fleet of 500 ships in 532 carried an army of 16,000, so the 1,100 ships of 468 may have been conveying something over 30,000 soldiers (sailors are not included here). In addition, as in 461, Marcellinus and some of his Illyrian command also came west. This time they first drove the Vandals out of Sardinia, and then occupied Sicily in force. A third force, recruited from the army of Egypt and placed under the command of the general Heraclius, was put ashore simultaneously in Tripolitania, where it joined with the locals in throwing out the Vandals who had occupied their cities since

465. Adding together the sailors and all these subsidiary forces, then, the total committed to the expedition was certainly well over 50,000 men.<sup>32</sup>

Command of this huge expedition was allotted to Leo's brother-in-law, the general Basiliscus, who had recently enjoyed considerable military success in the Balkans fighting off the last attempts of Attila's sons to find sanctuary south of the Danube. By the beginning of 468 everyone knew what was coming, and there is a huge sense of expectation in the panegyric Sidonius gave in Rome on 1 January of that year in honour of Anthemius' accession to the consulship. One influential historian has claimed that there is little reflection of the Byzantine armada in western sources. For once, I disagree with him.<sup>33</sup> Imagery of the sea and sailing suffuse Sidonius' speech, beginning with his introduction of Anthemius:<sup>34</sup>

This, my Lords, is the man for whom Rome's brave spirit and your love did yearn, the man to whom our commonwealth, like a ship overcome by tempest and without a pilot, hath committed her broken frame, to be more deftly guided by a worthy steersman that she may no more fear storm or pirate.

Marine metaphor then tacks in and out, with the speech concluding:

But now too strong are the breezes that drive my sails before them. Check, O Muse, my humble measures, and as I seek the harbour let the anchor of my song settle at last in a calm resting-place. Yet of the fleet and forces that you, O prince [Anthemius], are handling and of the great deeds you will do in a short while, I, if God further my prayers, shall tell of in due course . . .

The sense of anticipation of a naval expedition in the offing is unmistakable. And Sidonius' speech captures the grand design: 'Anthemius came to us with a covenant made by the two realms; an empire's peace has sent him to conduct our wars.' He had come with the promise of military salvation for the west, and in 468 it arrived. Sidonius caught the moment perfectly. That such an armada could be assembled was in itself a tour de force. Now would come the true test. The storm of battle was about to detonate once more in the western Mediterranean. The fleet, the supreme symbol of imperial unity, was on its way.

The Roman plan was emphatically not to fight a fleet engagement.